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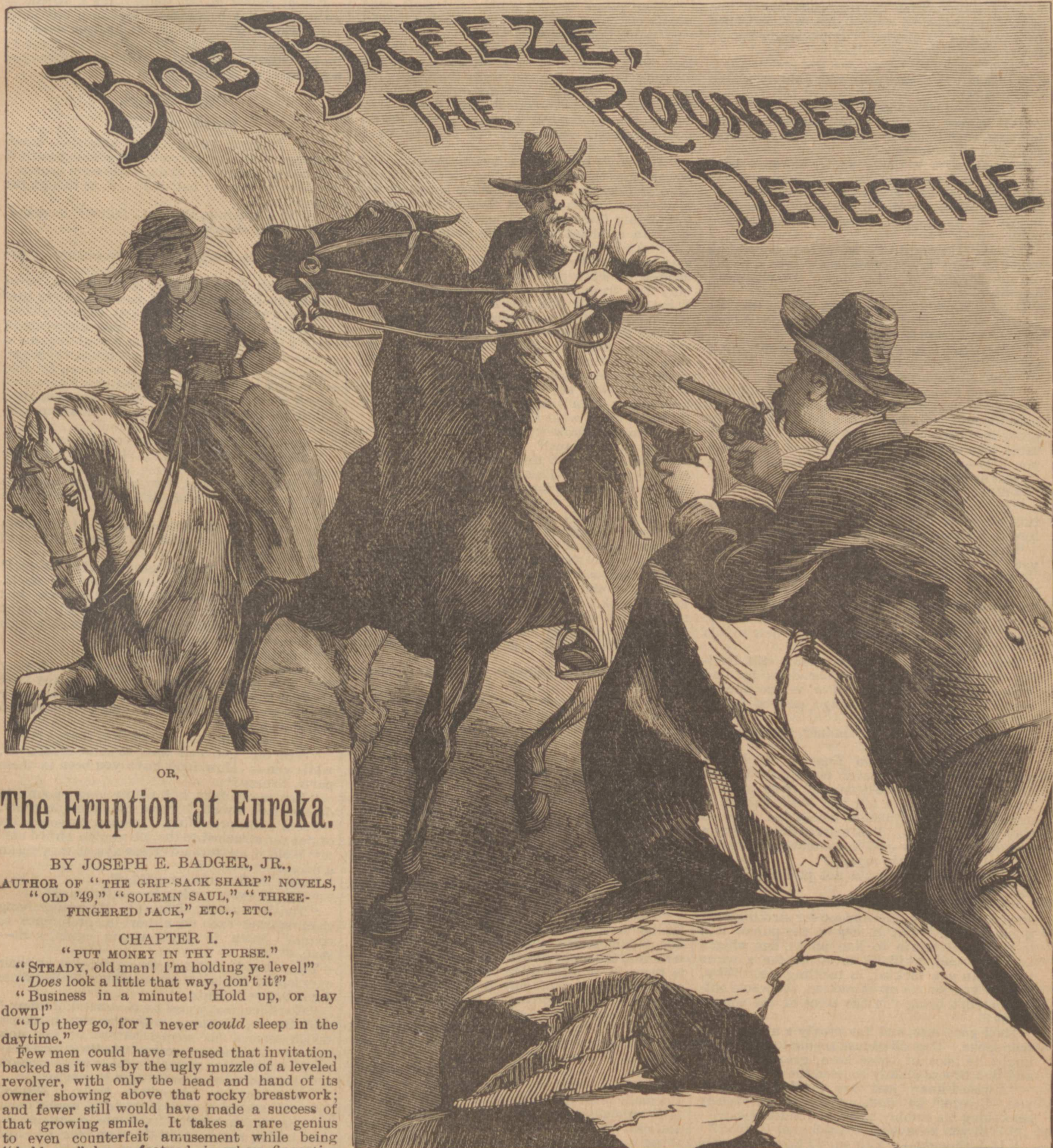
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OR,
The Eruption at Eureka.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS,
"OLD '49," "SOLEMN SAUL," "THREE-
FINGERED JACK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"PUT MONEY IN THY PURSE."

"STEADY, old man! I'm holding ye level!"

"Does look a little that way, don't it?"

"Business in a minute! Hold up, or lay
down!"

"Up they go, for I never could sleep in the
daytime."

Few men could have refused that invitation, backed as it was by the ugly muzzle of a leveled revolver, with only the head and hand of its owner showing above that rocky breastwork; and fewer still would have made a success of that growing smile. It takes a rare genius to even counterfeit amusement while being "held up" by a footpad, in whose fingertips grim death is lurking; but when that amuse-

"DON'T BE IN SUCH A RUSH, BOSS! HANDS UP, OR I'LL RIDDLE YOU!"

ment is clearly genuine, and momentarily increasing at that!

"Steady, I say! I don't want to hurt you, but—"

"Just my fix, cully, for I don't want to be hurt."

"None of your monkeying, then!"

"Take me for a Dago? You said elevate, and up went my dukes. Shall I mount a rock or climb a tree to make 'em higher? I always said you could raise a healthy crop of bristles without more'n half trying, Johnny Dogood, but I didn't know you were *all* hog!"

Five minutes before, neither one of these two men knew the other was anywhere in that part of the country. He of the revolver, having a few leisure minutes on his hands, and catching sight of a single footman plodding along that none too smooth stage-trail which led to the busy little mining-town of Eureka, hastily concluded to do a stroke of business which might pan out richer than the prospect showed on its surface.

Everything seemed in his favor, and lying in ambush until the dusty wayfarer came squarely under the muzzle of his masked battery, Johnny Dogood gave a ferocious and distorting twist to such of his visage as a slouched hat left visible, trusting to fear on the part of his victim to make future recognition impossible.

He counted on a rapid "clean-up," a hasty parting, with no afterclap; but now—instead of being the surpriser, he was the surprised!

"Steady, old pal!" the wayfarer swiftly added, at the same time leaping aside, out of line with that unsteady weapon, his own hand filled by a pistol as by magic. "Don't shoot, lest ye be shot!"

"Bob Breeze!"

"And just as breezy as of old, Johnny, unless—*is it* shoot?"

"I didn't—just a joke—"

"Of course! But I wouldn't do much laughing with that hammer up, cully. Might shake the thing off, you know!"

Dogood, with a sickly smile, lowered both hammer and pistol, looking very like one who expects his "joke" to give a dangerous recoil; but Bob Breeze imitated his action, laughing lightly as he stepped forward with greeting hand.

"Shake, old man! I'd as quickly guessed an angel of light lay in wait here, to-day, as my old side-pardner of other days. How goes it, anyway?"

Dogood mumbled something, but he was too greatly disconcerted to speak clearly, and once again Bob Breeze gave his careless chuckle.

"You can't forget the badge I used to wear, I see, Johnny?"

"Used? Then you're not—"

"One of Pinkerton's Pets? Never a bit!" and he spat contemptuously aside, as though the bare thought left a bad taste in his mouth. "To prove it: I was thinking of playing that very same joke of yours, old man, and if I'd sighted you first—well, maybe I'd have fizzled out on it, just as *you* did!"

"What! *you've* not turned crooked?"

"If I haven't, it's only because you called the turn ahead of me, Johnny. You see, I can afford to be frank, after this introduction."

"I didn't mean— 'Twas only a joke, I tell you!"

"Of course it was, Johnny, and I'd never have spoiled it for you, only I feared you'd spoil me, your hand took such a shiver when I called you by name. Have you lost your old nerve, cully, or was it just because you're new to this sort of business?"

Dogood growled, sulkily, suspicion still holding the upperhand. In former days he had known this airily-talking fellow as one of Pinkerton's detectives, in Chicago, and he feared arrest for his recent move.

Bob Breeze altered his manner, speaking like one in thorough earnest.

"You're foolish, John Dogood. If I was what you reckon, I'd never be talking to you after this fashion: you'd be stiff, or in darbies. I tell you again, and tell you *loud*, I'm out of harness, and ready to make money the quickest way that shows up. I've worked for dog's pay long enough. Now—I'll make money: honestly if I can, but *I'll make money!*"

"Then you don't—you'll not pull me, for this fool caper?"

"Not if I know myself, cully, though you deserve some sort of punishment for striking such a blind lead. 'Put money in thy purse' is a mighty good motto to live up to, but when I take the road, 'twill be to strike for a surer thing than *you* tackled, in tackling *me*. Why, man, if you set me up at auction, the whole outfit wouldn't bring you the price of one square drunk!"

Their gaze met, and for nearly a minute neither spoke. Dogood seemed trying to read what might lie back of those keen, gray-blue eyes, and Bob Breeze plainly courted the scrutiny.

"I wish I knew just how far I might trust you, Breeze," he said, at length, nervously smoothing his stubbly beard and mustache.

"Will you believe me if I tell you, Dogood?"

"If I thought— You surely haven't turned crooked, Bob?"

Before answering, the man from Chicago cast a glance along the rude road, in both directions. No signs of human life were visible. To all seeming they were the only occupants of that region, and it was wild, rugged, desolate enough, in all conscience.

"You're not in a hurry to get anywhere, Johnny?"

"There's no great rush."

"Good enough! I'm bound for the next town, which I understand is called Eureka. I've never been there, and only head for it because it happens to be ahead. So—let's draw out of the trail a bit, and see if we can't come to a more perfect understanding."

John Dogood raised no objections, but led the way through the rocks in silence. He was still far from feeling at ease in his mind, and that fact was quite sufficient to convince Breeze that he was but little more than a novice in the art of highway robbery, as yet.

Seated at their ease on one of the rare spots of grass among the rocks, there was a brief spell of silence, during which both men seemed considering what to say. Bob Breeze spoke first:

"Put money in thy purse!" One of the finest sermons in church I ever listened to, Johnny, was preached on that text. Of course the minister drew a vastly different deduction from *his* text, but—I've cut loose all old ties, and struck out for fresh pastures, with that text as my motto: *Put money in thy purse!* Honestly, if it comes the easiest and most plentiful along that line, but—*put money in thy purse!*"

"You mean that?" slowly asked Dogood, keenly watching the face of his old-time friend.

"All of it, Bob Breeze?"

"And more, if more there be, cully! Take a look back, please. You knew me when I first went on the force, for you were there ahead of me. You know that I did my duty, the best I knew how. You can bear witness that I tried to do the profession honor, as well as my own manhood. And what did I make by it all?"

"Just day's wages. I put more than one rich reward into their pockets, through my wits, my sand, if I do say it myself. What better off was I, at the end of each year? I had scars to show, but mighty few ducats! I had praise enough to stuff an elephant for Thanksgiving, but what else? And when I was wise enough to let my eyes be closed by good yellow dust, barely long enough to let a poor devil skip out, I was not only fired from the force, but sent to do time at Joliet! And all this by the very men into whose purse I'd been cramming good money!"

"The Pinkertons sent you over the road?"

"For a fact! And they took mighty good care to see that I should have another terribly rocky road to travel, after coming out, too!"

"Black list, eh?" with a smile, gradually broadening to a laugh, on his rat-like face.

"Don't I know what *that* means, though!"

"Then you know what a little hell of your own on earth means!"

"You bet I just *do!* But *you*—I wouldn't have thought they'd hit *you* so hard. I remember the boys on the force used to call you Pinkerton's Pet!"

"Maybe that is one reason why I was pinched so nasty," admitted Breeze, with a grim laugh that held precious little mirth in its notes. "I was trusted so thoroughly, you see! And then, too, the fellow I let slip across the border was a high-roller, and the Agency had sworn to bring him to book. Well, I couldn't withstand temptation, that bout, and as the covey not only offered to put money in *my* purse, but crammed it to overflowing, my grip was broken, and I lost my man."

"How did they tumble to the trick, if he got away?"

"By turning another trick, of course. You know the tribe, Johnny; an oath once, is an oath always with them. I made the arrest, at a great risk, but he got away. Another lad had better luck, and when put into their sweat-box for a little chatter, the crook blew the gaff until you couldn't rest!"

"He sold you out, then?"

"For less than a mess of pottage, I reckon, too! And so they put me to playing checkers with my nose, at Joliet! Only two years, but each one of them was long enough to count a century!"

"You had time to salt down the ding-bats, of course, Bob?"

"Never a salt! If I had, I'm not so certain I'd be here now. It's all right your talking about fun in the wild and woolly West, but, with me, the main question is how much money is there in it all? What chance is there for an enterprising sort of cuss to put money in his purse? No serious objection to risk, just so the profits are in proportion."

"If I didn't know you so well, Breeze, I'd really take you to be in sober earnest," slowly muttered Dogood, half-frowning.

"Then you'd take me for just what I am, old pard. I've served my time working for wages. It's make or break with me, from this time on. If I can make more by sticking to the straight and narrow path, all right; but if I sight anything worth having on the other side of the fence, bet your precious existence, Johnny

'twill take worse than barbs on the wire to keep me from flying the track!"

Lightly, airily though these sentences came across those lips, Dogood saw that grim resolution lay below that surface, and his doubts began to fade away until but a shadow lingered.

"I really believe you *do* mean it all, Breezy!" he said, at length.

"Why wouldn't I, Johnny? Of course I'd wear the regulation mask before all the rest of the world, but *with you*; that neat little jest of yours makes you the safest of confidants. See?"

"You think I really meant to rob you, then?"

"I don't think: I simply know it."

"Well, let it go at that, then. But you—would *you* hold up a stranger, Bob Breeze? No joking, but in dead earnest?"

"You wouldn't be asking that question, Johnny, if I had sighted you first, this day," grimly chuckled the man from Chicago. "I was feeling just tired and dirty and mean enough to have held up a blind beggar! And I'm not so mighty certain I wouldn't have burned powder before straining my tongue, either! So—*would* I hold up a stranger? Just set the chance before me, and I'll not only hold him up, but I'll skin him afterward, clean down to the quick!"

His manner and his looks, more than his words, decided the other, and as he reached out a hand to shake, John Dogood spoke up briskly:

"That settles it, old man! It's a streak of good luck that brought us together, out here, for I was wishing I might run across some fellow I could feel safe in tying to. You want to make money? All right! I'll guarantee you a good paying job!"

CHAPTER II.

GOING IT BLIND.

BOB BREEZE gripped the extended hand, shaking it heartily, his smile broadening until it reached the limits. Nothing could seem heartier, yet Johnny Dogood half-frowned, as though far from satisfied.

"Is it a bargain, then, old fellow?" he asked, after a brief silence.

"Sure!"

"But—why don't you ask the nature of the job?"

The man from Chicago gave a low, short laugh, but his smile seemed to change from sunshine to ice-glint for the moment, as he drawled:

"What's the use, Johnny? You know me of old. You know that if you are giving me a square deal, I'll stay with you through thick and through thin, whether the pay comes in gold eagles or fiddler's change. And *you* know, too, that if it's a trick, I'll give you a precious good hiding the instant the little joker shows up. So—as I said before—what's the use?"

"Never a trick from me to you, Breezy."

"This one don't count, eh?" chuckled the other.

"I didn't know you, then, old fellow, and I'm mighty glad of it, too! If I *had* known 'twas you, all this—"

"Wouldn't have come out, and we'd have been boring each other by posing as honest gentlemen? Well, praises be!"

"Come down to level ground, Bob Breeze!" with a frown of impatience showing itself. "Joking's all right in its time and place, but—*this* isn't Chicago, and when a fellow is caught going crooked out here, it isn't Chicago justice that's measured out to him!"

"In still plainer speech, Johnny?"

"Instead of sending him over the road, they send him over the range. If there is any trial at all, it usually comes too late to serve the poor devil who made a slip. So—don't jump at the bait too quick!"

"You are going to run the risk, though?"

"Yes, but I've had time to think it all over, while you— How long have you been in these parts, Breezy?"

"Not many days, but plenty long enough to decide for myself," came the prompt reply. "From your preaching, I reckon there's a bit of danger attached to the job you've hinted at?"

"Well, if matters go crossways, it may mean a noose!"

"And if all works smoothly?"

"It'll fill every pocket to overflowing!"

"That's enough, Johnny! I'd rather hang than starve, and do either in preference to coming down to day's wages again. So—shake!"

Their hands met in a firm grip, and as their eyes looked into each other, all doubts fled from John Dogood's brain.

"Consider me yours to command, Johnny," said Breeze, speaking with the airy briskness which seemed his second nature. "And now my ears are open to receive whatever you may see fit to pour into them. In other words, what's the job, and when does it begin to work?"

There was no immediate reply. Dogood lowered his eyes, and a shade of doubt came back to his naturally irresolute countenance. And taking note of this, the man from Chicago easily said:

"Don't let me rush you, cully, if there's any good reason for holding back. When I give my trust, it includes everything else."

"Then—you're willing to go it blind, in a measure, Breezy?"

"If you have any better reason for asking it than distrust in me, Johnny, yes."

Dogood drew a long breath as of relief, his face brightening up.

"If I didn't trust you thoroughly, old man, be sure I'd never have said this much, even! But—I'm going it blind, after a fashion, my own self, you see?"

"What's good enough for you, is good enough for me, Johnny."

"Then that's all right! It's a big thing—a mighty big thing, old fellow! When it comes off, as the boss says, Eureka! I'll think she's swallowed a volcano in her sleep, and that it's just beginning to give an eruption!"

"Then you're not my new boss, Johnny?"

Dogood laughed, amusedly.

"I? Don't you think it, Breezy Bob! I can play my part as well as the next man, but it's as a deck-hand, not as captain, or even as mate. When you come to know just what sort of programme has been laid out, you'll see how wide a guess you made in taking me for the originator."

"There's a regular gang, then?"

"Of course; with grips, and passwords, and signs, and all the rest of it. You'll know it all, when this meeting is over, and then—"

"A meeting? Then you have authority to introduce a stranger?"

"I'll make that all right, never you fear," came the confident reply. "There'll be boodle enough to go around, and the boss will jump at the chance of getting a good recruit. The only question is, will you consent to go it blind for a little while?"

"With you as guide, yes."

"Good enough!" giving a glance at the face of a silver Waterbury. "It's about time we were mogging along, but—"

"Steal enough moments in which to open my eyes a bit wider, pard. This job: what is its nature?"

"Well, I can't tell you exactly," hesitated Dogood, "but it's a mighty big thing! Heaps of money in it, too! Some risk, of course, for, even out here in Silver Idaho, a fellow can't pick up a fortune without paying something for it, you understand?"

"Clear as mud," with a grim smile flitting across his strong face as he rose to his feet. "I'll give it up, Johnny. Either you know nothing, or you're too well trained to betray your wisdom. So—lead on, cully, and I'll follow, to glory, ducats, or death!"

With a growl which might have meant pleasure or impatience, John Dogood took his old mate at his word, turning his back on the stage trail and plunging deeper into that wild, rock-strewn tract. For a few rods he led the way in silence, Bob Breeze treading closely upon his heels, but then the leader spoke again:

"I don't want you to think I'm steering shy of you, old man, for that isn't it at all. I only know that there's a mighty big job on the docket, which is dead sure to pan out a little fortune for each and every man who is lucky enough to have a finger in the pie. Knowing so much, I'm content to wait for the right moment to learn more. But you needn't come in unless you really wish to do so. It's not too late to turn back, if you object to going it blind for a bit."

"Didn't I give you my hand on it, cully?"

"Yes, but—"

"That settles it, then! I'm enlisted for three years or the war!"

After that, there seemed nothing more to say, and Johnny Dogood led the way with brisk steps, finally coming to a halt near a projecting point of rock, forming part of a frowning hill, almost cliff.

He cast a keen glance around, then dove under cover of a mass of vine-wreathed bushes, signing Bob Breeze to imitate his actions. And then, lifting a flat stone, and taking some coarse articles from the shallow depression thus laid bare, he spoke again:

"You see, pard, here are hoods, such as the gang wears during all meetings. With one of these on your head, even the boss wouldn't know but what you were his own brother! See?" and Dogood pulled one of the transformed grain-sacks over his head, to his shoulders.

"Your boss don't take a hood as a surety of membership, does he?"

"Of course not, but with the grips all right, he does. Give me your hand, and I'll show you. Remember, this one first, then this!"

Bob Breeze proved himself an apt pupil, and quickly learned the silent signals. From first to last he was showing a remarkable degree of trust in this old-time friend, but doubtless he had his reasons for so acting, and certainly John Dogood seemed thoroughly sincere in his desire to win a valuable recruit to the gang of which he formed part.

"I can't see how there can be any bother," he said, after teaching his mate the grips. "We never have had to show our faces, so far, and the chief has rather encouraged secrecy on our parts."

Still, in case a change should be rung in this time, I'll go your bail, and stand good for your fidelity."

"That's all right, Johnny, and a man would be a swine to ask more."

"Then, if you don't like the prospect, you can pull out without going further, and no harm's done. See?"

"If there's fair play in the job, I'll see it through, never you worry on that score, old fellow. And now, hadn't we better get a move on? If late at the rendezvous, we'll only invite closer attention."

Spurred by this hint, John Dogood left the covert, passing along the base of the cliff for a number of rods, then entering a dark and narrow cleft which, to a casual glance, appeared to be nothing more than a "pocket," or blind alley formed by nature.

The end of this depression was masked by bushes, stunted pines and scrubby cedars, the majority of them overgrown with vines and creepers. But, lifting a mass of these, Dogood gave a sign for his friend to follow, then passed into a dark opening thus revealed.

For a few yards the passage was contracted, and seemed all the darker from contrast with the bright sunlight which they had just left; but then came an abrupt turn, leading to a fairly spacious rock-chamber, dimly lighted by tin lamps burning kerosene oil.

By these lights Bob Breeze quickly made out several dark shapes, each one topped by a hood of sacking similar to the one he had donned for the first time. The various eye-holes were all turned their way, but no one gave them a greeting, and Johnny Dogood was the first to break silence, which he did by giving the password:

"Get there!"

"You bet!" came the answer, in unison, after which Dogood asked:

"Boss on deck, boys? Was afraid I'd be late, but I don't see him here, so—"

"He's not showed up, but I reckon he'll be on deck," came a deep, husky voice in response.

"It's a way he has—the boss!"

There was not much to see, thanks in part to the dim, smoky lights, but Bob Breeze took in all that was visible, moving carelessly about until he had a fair idea of his surroundings, so far as that rock-chamber was concerned. He saw that at least one passage led further back into the hill, but he had no excuse for entering it, even had it not been altogether dark.

For, just as he made out so much, a quick, ringing step came to his ears, and he turned to catch sight of a tall figure entering the light, his head and face masked after the general fashion.

It needed not the general murmur to convince him that this was the "boss," or chief of the gang, for his first words proclaimed as much.

"Waiting, are you? Better that than behind time, for—"

"Meaning me, captain?" came a muffled tone, as another shape came hastily into the chamber through the front entrance—that of a trim-built, active young fellow, if his movements alone were judged.

"If the cap fits, wear it, boy! Now, to business! Here's my hand, and my ears are open: password and grip, gentlemen, all!"

This promised to be the crucial test, and Bob Breeze took care to fall into line directly behind his friend, John Dogood, not knowing how soon he might feel the need of his guarantee. But nothing of this perfectly natural uneasiness was betrayed in his person, and as it came his turn to pass the ordeal, his hand met that of the chief without a tremor, giving the two grips correctly, then leaning forward to softly whisper the password:

"Get there!"

"You bet!" came the response, and the novice was passed on, to make room for the others.

When word and grips were taken up, the chief stood for a brief space with folded arms, like one reflecting what words he had better speak first.

Then, in deep, musical tones, despite the muffling hood, he began:

"My men, I've called you together this day, for the purpose of explaining in part why we are banded together. I know that you are to be trusted, one and all, for I have chosen you out of hundreds. And so I am free to say—"

He paused abruptly, his hands dropping to his belt of arms, his eyes flashing from figure to figure as though for the first time taking actual note of their number.

For, in harsh, angry tones, he now cried:

"Steady, all! Up with your hands, and let them be empty! You're one too many! Is there a spy among us?"

Each hand gripped a pistol as he spoke those fierce words.

CHAPTER III.

A BREEZY DEFENSE.

WITH that fierce suspicion upon his lips, the cowed chief leaned back far enough to bring his men all before him, save and except the young fellow who had entered the rock-chamber latest

of all. His actions duplicated those of his leader, and before the rest could fairly realize the nature of the trouble brewing, four revolvers were holding them level.

"Steady, all! I'll drop the first man who tries to touch a gun!" the chief sternly added.

"Hands up, I say!"

"Me, too!" chimed in the young fellow, crisply.

"But—I say, boss!" began John Dogood, only to have his explanation rudely cut short.

"Silence! Fall into line there, with both hands up!"

Robert Breeze said never a word through all this, though he knew only too well on whose shoulders that superfluous number would be pinned. Resistance would be worse than folly under the circumstances, and anything like flight was altogether out of the question, even had that method occurred to him.

Still, he did nothing that could hasten the inevitable discovery, taking his position in line with the others. Chance, or possibly intention on the part of John Dogood, placed several of the outlaws between the couple, and having once lost sight of him, even the keen eyes of Bob Breeze could not readily recognize his friend by that dim light.

The chief, still with revolvers commanding that silent line, took his time for the rest. He gazed keenly at each figure in turn, but if he made any discoveries by so doing, no one else was made the wiser.

"Lieutenant!" he spoke, at length.

"On deck, captain!" briskly responded the youthful-seeming fellow, who had so promptly backed up his superior.

"Draw a bit to the right, and if there is any attempt at kicking, use your guns. *Sabe?*"

"Sure! And if I waste two shells on one kicker, I'll furnish a third pill for my own digestion. You *sabe* that, gentlemen?"

The fellow spoke with most annoying cheerfulness, and hardly one within range of his voice but gained the impression that he rather hoped a fair chance would be offered for a display of his marksmanship.

"Don't be too previous, though, lieutenant! What I'm after is the truth, not a massacre. Now—steady, lads!"

Putting up the revolver which he had held in his right hand, the chief moved to the member who stood facing him on the left end of the line, saying:

"Your right hand, brother! Keep the other raised, until you have read your title clear. Now—give me the grip, brother!"

In silence the ordeal was begun, and two of the cowed members passed through it successfully, each in turn being sent apart from those who had not yet been examined as to their qualifications.

John Dogood was the third in line, and at least one other watched and waited the result with strong interest. He, too, passed, but instead of silently joining the others, he huskily began:

"You see, captain, I thought—"

"Pass over, brother," coldly interrupted his superior. "If you have aught of general importance to communicate, wait until the proper time comes 'round. Pass over, I say!"

An impatient movement of his armed left hand lent still sterner emphasis to his commands, and John Dogood shuffled across the rock-floor to his mates.

Three other members were passed as fully qualified, and this brought the chief to Bob Breeze, who promptly gave each of the grips taught him by his friend, and to which the regular responses were given. But then, instead of dropping his hand, the chief gave it another squeeze, then relaxed his muscles as though awaiting the reply.

None such being forthcoming, the chief with a swift movement caught at the coarse cowl, jerking it away, leaving exposed to the lights the face of a stranger to all save John Dogood.

"Who are you?" he sternly demanded, recoiling a pace, dropping the hood to grip his second revolver.

"A man and a brother, unless you kick against that relationship," coolly replied Breeze, his empty hands rising above his head once more.

"Who are you, I say? What brought you here, at this time?"

"My name is Bob Breeze, if that's what you want first, boss, and—"

The chief recoiled yet another pace, a harsh ejaculation cutting short that explanation. Unless signs lied, this was not the first time he had heard that name.

"A spy! A bloodhound! Who dared give him entrance here?" hoarsely cried the outlaw; and as he spoke, those yet in line fell abruptly away from the unmasked adventurer, hardly a hand among them all but what gripped a weapon.

But the man from Chicago never blenched, yet he surely must have realized his peril. Without lowering his empty hands, he coolly said:

"He who calls me a spy or a bloodhound, lies in his throat."

"Who and what are you, then?"

"A new recruit, if you need one, sir. If not—kick me out!"

Ugly mutterings ran through the little squad of members, and as if by instinct half their number brought pistols to bear upon that erect figure. If Breeze saw this, he gave no sign in face or in voice, confining his attention solely to the leader in front.

"You're a white man, boss, or your voice tells lies. Now—give me a fair, square deal. A dog has a right to expect so much."

"What brought you here?"

"A wish to make money easier and faster than by doing days' work, for one thing. I reckoned you'd welcome a recruit who was willing to do his share, caring mighty little how nasty the job might savor, just so there was money in it."

"What manner of men do you take us for, anyway?"

Bob Breeze gave a chuckle.

"Excuse me, captain! They say hard words break no bones, but I'm not entirely sure the old saying is based on facts. Until we're better acquainted, how'll this answer? For years back I've been starving as an honest man, and so I concluded to see the game out as a crook. If I've made a mistake, and struck the wrong gang, I reckon you know how to assess the proper penalty."

"If that penalty should be—death?"

Slowly came that grim query, and the leveled pistols lent an ugly emphasis to the last word. But Bob Breeze never flinched. Something like a sneer curled his lip for an instant before he made reply:

"Well, if you're too good for my company, 'twould be money in my pocket if I did croak, I reckon!"

A low laugh came from the hidden lips of the lieutenant, followed by the words:

"One on you, boss! Don't quench his light too sudden, I beg! The family lacks a regular clown, and all this lad lacks is a suit of motley to fill the bill!"

A smothered laugh came from somewhere, and Bob Breeze quickly caught at the opening thus afforded.

"You might do worse, boss, even if I'm the one to tell you so. As cold meat, I wouldn't be worth a cent a pound to you. I'm too tough to turn into steaks, even if you relished the tobacco-flavor. I'm not fat enough for a roast, and you'd need a full month to boil me tender. So I say—give me a fair shake, and if you're sorry after, I'll pay all damages. Isn't that fair enough to suit a hog?"

"Where are you from, and what sort of record do you bring with you? Talk straight, for we may know more than you give us credit for."

"That don't count, boss, since I'm dealing out straight goods," the man from Chicago retorted, actually appearing more at ease than he who held the power of life or death at his fingertips. "To begin at the right end, my name is Robert Breeze, sometimes called Breezy Bob, though why that transformation, I'll never tell you!"

"And we couldn't guess—oh, no!" drawled the lieutenant.

"Silence, brother!" sternly cried the chief. "Go on, stranger."

"Possibly because I lived in the Windy City," placidly suggested Breeze, as an after-thought. "Still, that don't count, just now. So—I was born in Chicago, and in due course of time I turned detective. Anything biting you fellows?" he asked, airily, as another ugly murmur came from among those cowed shapes.

"Did you come here as a detective?" asked the chief.

"Take me for a fool, boss?" grinned Breeze, with a wry gesture. "No, sir! I had more than a polite sufficiency of that, after doing time at Joliet."

"Doing time!" echoed the chief. "What for?"

"For putting money in my purse; nothing more, nothing less, your honor," breezily declared the ex-detective.

"After what fashion? Confound you, man, talk straight!"

"Straight as a string with a weight at both ends, boss! As I said, I turned detective, principally because my head was first turned, reading rogue-catching stories. I fancied I was a second Vidocq. I just knew I could lay 'way over the original Pinkerton, and as for his sons—if they were to stay in it at all, 'twould be solely because they looked on and took notes after my style!"

"Well, I managed to get on, at the Agency, and then I prepared to set, not only the lake afire, but the rest of the world as well! I fell a little short of my first calculations. I frankly own as much. I did one or two fair jobs, if I do say it myself, but—little glory came my way, and still less money!"

"For three years I did my level best to elevate the profession, and at the end of that period I took stock. I found that I had hardly made one end meat; the other half was dry husks, and the middle was stuffed with sawdust! And so—I fell from grace!"

"Turned crooked, you mean?"

"No, sir; turned wise in my old age! I'd been working for days' wages, and was not only forbidden to take perquisites from outsiders whom I may have served, but forced to turn over to the Agency what few plums were actually forced upon my clients. And so—when a good thing finally came my way, I froze fast to it!"

"I made bigger money for shutting my eyes and opening my hands, one night, than had come to me in all those three weary years. An important prisoner gave me the slip, only to be nipped by a luckier man. And then, through pure spite, the fellow blew the gaff!"

"Up to that date I had been known in the profession as Pinkerton's Pet, but that favor didn't save me. From the sweat-box, I was shifted to court, then railroaded to the Pen. I put in two solid years at Joliet, at hard labor, my wages being little grub and a great deal of paddling! Possibly you have heard of that particular kind of sauce, captain?"

"I've heard of it, yes," dryly assented the chief. "Go on, sir."

"May you never feel it—as I did!" with a long sigh that drew a half-smothered laugh from the lieutenant's cowl. "But that don't count, after all. I thought I was sent to paradise, when, at the end of my term, I was discharged. Instead, I found it a little hell on earth!"

"Wherever I went, I found the same thing: closed doors and buttoned pockets! I was on the black list. My history went ahead of me, and I couldn't get an honest job of work, even when I offered to turn my hand to a job for bare bed, and board myself!"

"I contrived to keep from starving outright: just how, don't matter at present. And when I saw that I couldn't fight my way within reaching distance of the Agency, I turned my face toward the setting sun, with one particular motto carved deeply on heart and in brain: 'Put money in thy purse!' Honestly, if it came easiest that way, but—put money in thy purse!"

"Then you are no longer connected with the Pinkertons?"

"Well, hardly! Do I look so mightily much like a hog, captain?"

"And you are positive you didn't come here as a detective?"

Bob Breeze gave his shoulders a shrug, and his voice took on a colder, sterner echo as he made reply:

"I suppose you've got a right to rub it in, sir, if only because the odds are all in your favor. But, frankly, if we two were alone, on equal footing, I'd answer you once for all—with fist, not tongue!"

The masked chieftain gave a quick signal to his men, and without a word of warning, half a dozen stout knaves leaped upon Bob Breeze, upsetting him through pure force of numbers, without granting him time to strike a single blow in self-defense.

CHAPTER IV.

A CRUCIAL TEST.

JOHN DOGOOD gave a start and a sharp cry as he saw the downfall of the friend he had led into such deadly peril, but before he could actually interfere, a clear, menacing tone rung forth:

"Steady, there! Touch a tool, and I'll drill a tunnel through your fool' brain!"

A revolver had him lined, and as Johnny caught a glimpse of those eyes through the holes in the hood, flashing luridly in the smoky light of the lamps, he shrunk back, hunching up a shoulder in protest.

"I didn't—I don't—"

"Keep on don'ting, then, unless you wish to cross the divide, my pretty fellow!" mockingly, yet viciously cut in the young officer.

"Good advice for even a fool, Dogood," grimly supplemented the chief, satisfied that his men were more than competent to complete their task without supervision. "Don't be too mighty impatient, for your turn is at hand."

Just as any other man would have done under like circumstances, Bob Breeze struggled desperately for the first few seconds, for, no matter how reckless a man may be, or however loudly he affects to welcome death, nature comes to the surface in such moments as these; then realizing how hopelessly he was overmatched, he gave way, permitting his assailants to bind his arms and his legs, without further trouble.

"All set, boss!" reported one of the men, rising to his feet.

"Lift him up. Stand him on his feet, against the wall, yonder. No use in taking two bites to one cherry!" grimly commanded their superior, and his instructions were promptly carried out.

The luckless man's tongue was left unfettered, but he did not attempt to use it, just then. Possibly he felt that nothing he could say would gain him mercy, since the tale he had told proved insufficient to win him immunity.

The chief turned toward John Dogood, who was still cowering before the pistol of the lieutenant.

"You brought this fellow in here, I believe? Speak up, man!"

"Yes, but I thought—"

"Why did you do it? Was it to sell us all to the law, through this infernal blood-sucker?"

With a desperate effort Dogood rallied, feeling that his own life was at stake unless he could fully satisfy his grim judge of his good intentions.

"I meant it all for the best, boss; cross my heart if I didn't! I knew he'd turn out a rare good hand, and so—well, I'm terrible sorry if it mads you, sir, but—"

"What reason had you for thinking I wanted a recruit, Dogood?"

"I reckoned you did, or would, sir, if the whole job was to come off down at—"

"Stop!" sternly cried the chief, lifting a clinched hand as though about to dash it against those masked lips. "What job? How much did you leak? The truth, man, if it's in you!"

"I wouldn't dare lie, to you, sir," said Dogood, plucking up a little more nerve as he realized how desperate his own case was growing. "I didn't tell him anything to hurt. I just said I could get him a job, if he didn't mind it's being a bit off-color. Just that much, sir!"

"What right had you to say even so much? Did I ask you to recruit for me?"

"No, sir, but I thought—let me tell you, sir!" desperately plunging into his story. "I was coming up here, when I caught sight of a fellow coming 'long the stage-trail. I had time enough, and I lost my last dollar, last night, poking. So—I held him up!"

"Then I saw who he was, and we come to a talk, like. He told me how he left the force, and then—he swore he was crooked! I knew that if he spoke true, he'd make a rare good hand for you, sir, and so I just let out enough to let him inside here, meaning to let you see for yourself what manner of duck he was."

"You gave him the grips and the word, of course, since he made use of them all?"

John Dogood was silent. Plainer than ever he saw how fatally he had "put his foot in it," and his knees began to shake under his weight.

"You gave him a disguise, as well. You went his security, so to speak. You put him, a stranger, where he could see and hear everything, although you knew I called a meeting for the express purpose of fully explaining the little game I planned to play. And if I hadn't spotted him, through finding one more than I had passed the word to, you would have let him go free, to—do what?"

Without waiting for an answer, his revolver came to a level, and he sternly cried:

"Hands up, John Dogood! Make another motion, and I'll lay you out, too cold for skinning! Bind him, lads!"

This, like all other commands coming from those masked lips, was promptly obeyed, and two minutes later John Dogood was disarmed, bound hand and foot, then propped up against the wall directly opposite Bob Breeze.

There was a grim half-smile upon the face of the latter, for he felt that, while speaking one word for him, Johnny had offered thrice as many for himself.

The chieftain placed himself midway between the two bound men, his eyes taking note of his men as they ranged themselves in a semicircle in front, with the second in office standing at ease where he could both see and command all.

"This isn't exactly what I bade you assemble here for, to-day," the leader began, speaking coldly and deliberately. "Still, this is business, now it has turned up—business, which I'll go bail never a one of you will ever forget, though you live to turn a century!"

"I thought I had used rare good judgment in picking my men for the job I have in view, but it appears that I made at least one error. I knew that John Dogood was hardly the stuff of which leaders are made, but I took him for a first-class deck-hand!"

"I never—I'll make it up, boss, in any way you like!" desperately ventured the culprit named thus pointedly.

"Silence! Speak again until I call on your tongue, and I'll add a gag to what you've already received," harshly reproved the chief.

"As for you, my true lads, let me tell you the blunt truth."

"You heard what this fellow on my right hand had to say for himself. He gave you part truth. I'll say so much for him. Now, I'll give you the rest of it; and I'm speaking by the card, remember."

"His name is Robert Breeze, and he does come from Chicago. He was known there, less than four years ago, as Pinkerton's Pet, and not one of all the bloodhounds employed by the old Scotchman's boys, stood higher in their estimation than did this same devil! The records will prove as much, if any of you ever get a chance to overhaul them. But, that isn't the main point."

"He says he was railroaded by Pinkerton. I believe he lies in saying so. He says he has left the force; another lie, I'm laying long odds. He says he was driven to the West, by the persecutions of his former bosses; and that, too, I believe is made up to fit the present occasion."

The Pinkertons may have sent him out here, but it was as a bloodhound, not as a fugitive from justice!"

"Then each and every one of your beliefs is a lie!" boldly cried the prisoner. "I'll have the satisfaction of telling you so much, if nothing more!"

"I believe that Bob Breeze, or Breezy Bob, whichever name suits you best, came out here with the express purpose of breaking us up, as a band! My only doubt is which party sent for him: Barker Brothers, old Hawley Sprague, or Bailey Pemberton, the Gold Coin Sport. Which one was it, you bloodhound?" he viciously demanded, turning toward Breeze.

"Neither one, your honor," came the cool response. "I never heard any of the names you mention before this minute. If any one sent me, it must have been the devil—judging from my present pickle!"

"You refuse to confess, then?"

"I have made full and open confession, your reverence. If you can't recognize the truth when it comes your way, why blame me?"

The chief turned with an impatient gesture from the prisoner. If at all a reader of human nature, he must have realized how little chance he had of breaking down the will of one who could speak so airily, so coolly, so carelessly even, in the presence of death.

"I repeat my statements, men: this is a detective, here with the hope of running our necks into the death-noose. What does such a fellow deserve, when trapped?"

"Death!" cried one and all, in unison.

"And death say I!" sternly echoed the leader; then turning his gaze toward trembling John Dogood, to a d:

"And when a sworn pal proves treacherous? When a sworn pal betrays our secrets, our grips, our passwords, our refuge: when a sworn pal deliberately introduces a bloodhound into our midst, covered by a disguise which his treacherous hands supply: what fate does he merit?"

"Death—death—death!" came that ominous chorus.

"And death say I!" echoed the chief, once more.

"No, no! I didn't—I don't!" hoarsely screamed the miserable wretch as he heard his condemnation. "I meant it all for the best! He lied to me—lied to me like a cur, while I was treating him like a brother! I never— Kill him, if you like, but—spare me, I beg!"

In his horrible agitation John Dogood tried to lift his bound arms in appeal, but the effort destroyed his balance, and he fell helplessly to the floor, there writhing and shivering, moaning and pleading.

At a sign from the chief he was lifted to his feet, and then his superior officer coldly spoke:

"You have heard your sentence, John Dogood. If we consent to spare you, what service will you perform in return?"

"Anything—everything! Only spare my life!"

"If we agree to take you back into our family, forgetting and forgiving your slip, would you remove this bloodhound?"

Dogood stared bewilderedly from the speaker to Bob Breeze, then back again. Slowly the horrible truth crept into his dazed brain, and with terrible eagerness he grasped at the chance, huskily panting:

"Kill him? Will that—let me go free?"

"Yes, if you agree to take the job off our hands."

"You mean it? It isn't just another— Say you really mean it, boss, and I'll kiss your feet! I'll be your bound slave! I'll—"

"I object!" sharply interposed Bob Breeze. "Bring a blind mule to kick out my brains! Fetch a mangy cur to make me scratch my heart out! Anything, everything, just so you don't shame me by letting such a miserable whelp send me over the divide! I draw the line at that!"

"You haven't anything to say, Bob Breeze," coldly retorted the chief, making a motion which set his men to work removing the bonds from Dogood's limbs. "A word with you in private, lieutenant."

They drew aside, and spent a minute or two in low speech, not one syllable of which could be caught by Robert Breeze, though he strained his sense of hearing to the utmost. Then both came leisurely back, and the lieutenant laughingly offered Dogood a flask of liquor, saying:

"Take a bracer, man! If you try to snoot our Chicago friend, you'll miss him, and fill the rest of us chuck full of mineral! Drink, man!"

The shivering wretch caught eagerly at the flask, and only relinquished it when his superior remonstratively pulled it away.

"You mean it, boss?" he mumbled, still doubting what he considered his good fortune. "If I kill him, you'll not—I can go free?"

"You can go free, and we'll take you back into full membership, Dogood," came the cold response. "Here's my gun. Don't use it until I give the word, then blow him through!"

"Fall back, lads!" mockingly cried the lieutenant. "It's like a woman preparing to throw a stone; mighty onsartain which!"

But as his hand gripped the pistol, Dogood seemed to rally a bit, and as the chief led him up in front of the doomed detective, he mumbled, huskily:

"I've got to—just got to, Bob! It's you or me, and—"

"Shoot, you cur!" coldly cried the detective, his eyes fairly blazing with hot scorn. "Don't poison me with your foul breath!"

"At his heart—fire!" sharply ordered the chief.

The revolver rose to touch Bob Breeze over the heart. Then—the pointed hammer rose and fell!

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

ON that same sunny Sabbath Day, a young man was half-seated, half-lying in a tolerably snug spot overlooking the collection of houses, stores, saloons and other structures which went to form Eureka City.

Not the far more widely known Eureka of California, nor of Colorado, or Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico; one and all of which you may find by a glance at the present-day maps, or come across tourist-wise if you prefer; but the Eureka of Idaho, which at one time threatened to cast forever into the shade all rivals to that name. That was not so many years ago, yet the latest maps do not contain the name, even though they show the place: Eureka then, is Something-else now!

With the faint, bluish-gray haze which so frequently softens our mountain pictures, Eureka looked almost lovely this fair day, and Alick McGregor might easily have found pardon for losing all consciousness of his actual surroundings in his admiration for that gem of mining-towns.

To tell the simple truth, however, Alick had eyes for but one building out of the many, and thoughts for but a single inhabitant out of those hundreds going to make up Eureka City.

"Will she come? Will she go? If I wasn't a coward as well as a fool, I'd not be here, but over yonder, making a spoon or spoiling a horn!"

Young McGregor made an almost fierce gesture with his clinching right hand while muttering these words. There was a brief scowl darkening his brows, but even then the mustached lips betrayed far more of love than of anger.

A pleasant enough looking young fellow, this far-away descendant of Rob Roy, but hardly the ideal lover of romantic literature, so far as surface appearance goes. He was a bit too stockily built for grace, though a lover of athletic sports would never have passed him by without at least a second glance. His features were strong, rather than regular, and without actually touching the line which divides ugly men from their more fortunate fellows, his was a face which needed time to produce its most favorable impression.

His close-cropped hair and full beard were ruddily brown as the sunlight fell across them. His eyes, though deep-set, were large and bright, of that description which one prefers to see in a friend than find in opposition.

His garb was neat enough, and from a Eureka point of view, might possibly come under the suspicion of being foppish, since the business suit of "ready made" clothing was eked out with stiffly starched linen and neat tie of white lawn. A brown derby hat lay near, and his thick hair showed signs of puzzled fingers having been at work.

Alick McGregor was over head and ears in love, as fully two-thirds of Eureka could have told you. Through no fault of his, however, for the young Scotch-American was not one to post his private affairs on each street corner. And at least one-third of the citizens could have added the information that this was yet another instance of the old adage proving true: love's barque was drifting into troubled waters.

From where he lay in waiting, if not actually in hiding, Alick McGregor could see the roof which usually sheltered the maiden whom he had come to fairly worship; and none could enter or depart from that dwelling without coming directly under his notice.

The building belonged to Hawley Sprague, a capitalist, who found greater profit in lending money than in risking his cash in mines which might or might not pan out a profit. He had opened a bank in Eureka, and besides doing a general business in that line, accepting deposits, shaving notes, making loans on good security, he was noted as being the father of about the fastest "young man about town," in Gilbert Sprague, and as the guardian of the prettiest girl, Myrtle Umfreville.

This bank, which Eureka and adjacent towns found little less than a financial blessing, was a private institution, of course. Except its founder and sole owner, Gilbert Sprague was the only official connected with Sprague's Bank.

Alick McGregor, too, held an important position in town, since he had charge of Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express Office; a fact which was a guarantee as to his honor and fidelity, as may readily be comprehended when one remembers

that, as yet, Eureka was without a railroad, and all shipments of bullion out or money into town had to pass through his hands, by way of the daily stage-line.

And yet, this guarantee was insufficient for Hawley Sprague, so far as accepting McGregor as a suitor for his ward's hand in marriage. He openly frowned upon the young fellow's love, and though he had not yet gone so far as to actually forbid him the house, Alick knew this would surely follow his openly pressing that suit.

A flush that was closely akin to shame came into his honest-seeming face just then, for that very thought flashed across his brain as he lay watching the Sprague residence.

"He'd kick me out—or try it!" those thoughts ran. "And yet, I'd give him the chance, only too quick, if Myrtle didn't insist on waiting. Wait? I'd be willing to wait ten years, if I could only be sure of winning in the end!"

So he told himself, yet the very impatience with which he watched yonder distant building for a glimpse of his love, flatly contradicted the young fellow. Ten years? He would not willingly wait as many weeks, could any effort on his part cut that period of probation short: and only a fool could find heart to blame him, either!

Presently Alick caught his breath sharply, shading his eyes with a brown hand which trembled visibly. A figure surely was moving in front of yonder building? And—a half-laugh, half-sob broke from the lips of the excited lover, for now he recognized the one for whom he had waited and watched so long, so eagerly. Myrtle Umfreville had left the house, and was slowly sauntering toward the hills, away from town!

It was not an appointment, for the maiden was moving away from, rather than drawing nearer, the young man, as would have been the case had he taken his station in accordance with a mutual agreement.

McGregor paused only long enough to make sure Myrtle was not bound for any of the neighbors', and when she had passed beyond the last house in that direction, he broke cover, descending that sharp slope with recklessly long strides, heedless of the little river which lay between himself and his lady-love.

By making a slight detour Alick might have crossed the stream at the bridge, but his haste was far too great for that: it was so much easier to risk his limbs and neck by leaping from rock to rock where the rapids brawled!

The passage was a difficult as well as dangerous one, and only an ardent lover would have ventured it in such haste. Twice McGregor saved himself by his wonderful activity alone, and finally scaled the further bank, never taking note how destructive to a fine polish is water first, dust after!

Once sure that Myrtle could not turn back without meeting him, the young man moderated his pace a bit, lest too hasty movements call unwelcome attention that way; but it took only a few minutes for him to win nigh enough for a gentle call:

"Miss Umfreville! Myrtle—my precious!"

A few long strides divided these words, and with the last ones given, strong arms clasped fair form, and lips found lips.

Then, as the maiden blushing withdrew herself, Alick asked:

"Why did you send me that excuse, Myrtle? Why beg me not to call last evening, as agreed?"

That sweet blush faded, and for a brief space her blue eyes drooped as though afraid to meet his passionate gaze. Alick frowned darkly. It was this happening which had sent him so moodily into the hills that morning early, which had given him disagreeable food for thought through all those hours of waiting and watching. And now, as he waited for his answer, the green monster came creeping back to heart and brain once more.

But then Myrtle lifted her eyes to his, smiling faintly, though with pain rather than mirth. And when she made reply, it was frankly, honestly as the most captious could wish.

"Because Mr. Sprague objects to your calling on me, Alick."

"What right—what objection can he find to my calling, Myrtle?"

"Must I tell you, Alick?"

"Unless you prefer my asking your guardian, yes!"

"No, you must not! Promise me, Alick! He is so angry, that—"

"You're giving me reasons for meeting, not avoiding him, little lady," interrupted McGregor, his brown eyes turning darker. "I'm not a coward, whatever my other faults."

"Don't, dear," her eyes moistening, her little hand trembling perceptibly as it rested on his arm. "Isn't it hard enough for me to deny you, Alick, without making it still worse? Is it all my fault that a cloud has come between us?"

"Not between—nothing shall ever come between us, darling, so long as you trust me, and have full faith in my love."

She yielded to his passionate embrace, and her lips did not refuse the toll he demanded, yet that troubled light still lay in her eyes, still echoed in her voice as she forced herself to say:

"It is hard to say, Alick, but—I must! The tongues of slander have been busy, and Mr. Sprague is very angry with us both; with me because I will not give you up altogether; with you because—I know it is only cruel slander, Alick!"

"Let me know, as well, little lady," said McGregor, with forced calmness, his cheeks and brows flashing a bit deeper than usual.

"He told me—he had heard from others—that you drank too much, that you gambled heavily," faintly murmured the maiden, her blue eyes sinking before his, in shame at bringing such black charges.

"Only when I can't see you, Myrtle," was the unexpected reply.

"But—it is not true, surely, Alick?"

"Not true, so far as drinking or gambling to excess, Myrtle."

"But—why do you do it at all, dear?"

"Can't you understand, darling?" and his strong arms closed about her form once more. "A man is so different from a woman! You can bear up in meek silence, but we—how can I make you understand, pet? If I drank a little, or threw away a few dollars at faro, 'twas only to help kill time—only to keep me from thinking! What else could I do? You said I must not call on you openly, at your home. You said I must be patient and wait until you could win over your guardian to our views. And all the time I knew that Gil Sprague was given a clear field, and—I couldn't help it, Myrtle! I had to do something to kill thought!"

"But—gambling! Oh, Alick, how could you?"

"Just as I've told you, Myrtle," forcing a laugh, but taking both of her hands in his as he forced her to meet his gaze fairly. "Promise for pledge, little lady! Marry me, and I'll swear to never touch card or sip liquor again!"

"If it might be, Alick!" with a faint sigh.

"But—I can't!"

"Why not?"

"Surely you know? Because Mr. Sprague would refuse his consent, and I am wholly under his control until I'm twenty-one, two whole years!"

Then Alick McGregor lost his self-control, almost fiercely crying:

"That infernal schemer! Under his control? Do you fairly realize how much that means, Myrtle Umfreville? Can't you begin to guess why it is that Hawley Sprague so bitterly opposes my suit? Are you blind, girl, that you can't see the pitfall he is preparing for your feet?"

"Alick!"

"I've kept it back too long already, Myrtle," he said, resisting her effort to withdraw her hands, speaking rapidly, passionately: "The time has come round for plain speaking, and—you set the example!"

"I only—Alick, you frighten me!"

"You only repeated part of what Hawley Sprague poured into your ears: I know that, dear," his voice softening a bit. "He painted the truth blacker than it deserved, and why? Because he wished to disgust you with me, and so make it easier to help his cub, Gilbert Sprague!"

At that moment a sharp voice rung forth:

"I say! who's taking my name in vain?"

CHAPTER VI.

PLEADING HIS CAUSE.

MYRTLE, with a half-smothered ejaculation, jerked her hands free, all the more easily that Alick McGregor wheeled swiftly toward the point from whence that sentence proceeded, his brows gathering in an ugly frown, his face paling with anger rather than aught akin to fear.

The speaker promptly put in an appearance, passing from behind a clump of bushes which grew near a patch of rocks. He gave an affected start, lifting his gloved hands as he came face to face with the lovers.

"Preserve us—something! Surely 'tis not you, Myrtle?"

"Why shouldn't it be Miss Umfreville?" sharply demanded McGregor, before the young lady could answer.

"Your presence, sir, is reason enough," coldly retorted the latest comer, with a nod that was more defiant than polite.

"And your presence is more than superfluous, Mr. Sprague."

"Stop! I beg of you, gentlemen!" cried Myrtle, her face very pale, though she showed real courage in stepping between the twain, a hand turned toward each. "You must not quarrel, for—"

"A coward never quarrels with a man!"

"Thanks," mockingly bowed Sprague, with a sneering smile upon his handsome face. "It's not every one who admits so much self-knowledge, Mr. McGregor."

"Nor every sneak who comes so near hearing the whole truth spoken about himself. You were playing spy, and—"

Once more the maiden interposed, for such sharp words could hardly fly back and forth without carrying still deadlier missiles in their train. She hardly knew what words passed her

lips, in her natural excitement, but they were sufficient to delay, if not wholly avert, a collision.

Gilbert Sprague was the coolest, outwardly at least. Possibly because he was naturally less intense than the Express agent. Be that as it may, he showed greater adroitness during those first few moments, and bowing to the lady, he said, smoothly:

"Since you command, I obey, Myrtle. Otherwise, I would punish yonder fellow as his brutal words deserve."

"Say that you'll even try, Gil Sprague, and I'll mighty quick give you a chance to try it on!" flashed McGregor, hotly. "You were playing the spy and eavesdropper! Well, you surely proved the old saying true, for you heard precious little in your own favor!"

"Alick—Mr. McGregor!" pleaded the maiden, tremulously.

"Don't notice the vulgar cad, dear," purred Sprague, turning a shoulder toward his rival.

"If he has been annoying you, I'll see that he gives no further trouble. Take my arm, and we'll—"

Alick sprung between them, a fierce thrust sending his rival back a pace, and a hard laugh crossing his lips as the cashier thrust one hand into his bosom, as though in quest of a weapon.

"Heeled, are you?" sneered McGregor, taking note of that action, even as he turned toward Myrtle, flinging over a shoulder the words:

"Maybe my back will nerve you to shoot or to stab! Now—Myrtle, take your choice between us two! We both love you, after our fashion; I'd die for one kind word from your sweet lips! He'd risk the Pen and stripes for a fair grab at the fortune your father left you! Now—choose!"

Either that thrust, which was little less than a blow, or those words, which may have come dangerously near the truth, stung Gilbert Sprague out of his assumed coolness, and a vicious oath hissed across his lips as he strode nearer the lovers.

His right hand was hidden in his bosom, as though clutching a weapon of some sort. His naturally swarthy face had grown dark with hatred and mortification. His strong white teeth showed beneath his jetty mustaches, lending him an almost wolfish expression for the moment.

"Yes, take your choice, Myrtle Umfreville!" he echoed, harshly, with the swift addition: "And while electing, remember your guardian! What will he say to this escapade of yours? What will he do when he learns in what manner his ward spends her Sabbath?"

Alick half-turned, with a gesture so fierce that Sprague sprung back a pace, an ugly blade flashing in the clear sunlight as his right hand slipped from his bosom and made ready to ward or to strike.

"Coward!" sneered his rival, with curling lip, then turning toward the young lady, without a seeming thought of the peril he was inviting by thus exposing his back to a dastard stroke. "Myrtle, this is no time for faltering. You see us both. We both claim to love you, and have asked your love in return. Now—choose between us, once for all!"

"Let me go—let me go home!" faintly murmured the poor girl.

"The man you elect will escort you home, Miss Umfreville," said the agent, with forced calmness. "Either one will be more than proud to serve in that capacity."

"You are cruel to force me, Alick!" faintly murmured the girl, and as though his ears, too, caught those words, Gilbert Sprague once more interfered, with:

"Don't listen to the vulgar cad, Myrtle! I'll see you safely home, and then I'll take steps to prevent any further insolence from this source, at least!"

McGregor never even cast a glance in that direction, though he was risking far more than even he thought, just then. A devil of hatred was urging Gilbert Sprague to send that ugly blade home betwixt those broad shoulders, and if he could have felt sure a plea of defending a lady from insult would stand, that blow would almost surely have been delivered.

"The rest belongs to you, Miss Umfreville," sternly insisted Alick, his face pale as though death had already implanted his cold seal. "If you will accept my escort, I'll be nearer heaven than I ever dared hope; but—I'll never play second fiddle to mortal man!"

Almost ere the last words had left his lips, Myrtle took his arm, saying in barely audible tones:

"Take me away—take me home, Alick!"

Gilbert Sprague gave a fierce curse, but McGregor laughed outright in his great joy. His other hand closed over hers as it trembled on his arm, and he flung a triumphant glance toward his rival, saying:

"Now, Gilbert Sprague, run on ahead and tell pap, if you like!"

By no means elegant language, nor just what one's hero ought to say on the eve of a glorious victory, but Alick McGregor was a very mortal man, and that accounts for much.

"I'm duty bound to tell your guardian what I have seen and heard, Miss Umfreville," coldly said Sprague, replacing his weapon in its hid-

den sheath. "As for you, Alick McGregor, I'll see you later!"

The victorious lover did not waste a glance in that direction, much less fling back word, threat or taunt. The woman he idolized was leaning heavily upon his arm, and though he was leading her toward the home to which entrance had almost been denied him, the present moments were all-sufficient—for the moment, that is!

Gilbert Sprague turned a sharp angle, evidently with no intention of either following or of watching them further. Possibly he needed time in which to rally from that decisive defeat.

Alick McGregor was far too happy to remain long silent. Myrtle had chosen, as he demanded she should, but—he wanted even more!

"Is it for life, darling?" he whispered, softly, his bowed head almost touching hers as they moved slowly in the direction of Eureka. "You chose, but—is it for all time?"

"It is for life, Alick," came the still softer murmur.

Even then the ardent lover had not a thought to spare for his defeated rival, and without a glance of caution in that direction, his head bowed lower, until his lips met hers.

"Don't, Alick!" murmured Myrtle, more thoughtful, as became her sex. "If he should see! If he should tell!"

"Let him see—the cur! Let him tell—if he dares!"

A half-careless, half-defiant glance assured him that Gilbert Sprague was lost to view among the rocks, and as penalty for springing a false alarm, Myrtle was robbed of yet another kiss.

"If the cur should tell, what matter, pet?" half-coaxingly whispered Alick, with a canny attempt to make hay while the heavens were propitious. "You are mine before heaven now, and you shall be mine in the eyes of all the world before another week rolls by!"

"Oh, Alick!"

"Say yes, pet," he urged, in his most tender tones. "Is it so hard to speak? You love me—you do love me, dearest?"

"Better than all the world else, Alick!"

"Then—why force me to wait longer, darling? I'm not rich, but I can take care of a wife, and—"

"I'm not afraid to trust that to you, Alick," with a faint smile and a shy glance upward. "But—my guardian!"

"A fig for him! What can he do, more than growl and croak and wish me to the—further ends of the earth?"

"You forget, Alick," said Myrtle, gravely, almost reprovingly. "When father died, he left me in Hawley Sprague's care. He bade me look upon him as a second father. And—I promised!"

"And it isn't Hawley Sprague's fault that he isn't your second father—in law!"

A bit of his fiery temper showed itself in words and in tone, but instead of recoiling from him, Myrtle only clung closer to her lover. What woman draws breath who seriously objects to just a spice of jealousy on the part of her true-love?

"That he could never be, Alick, even if you—if we had never met and—known each other," she murmured, with pretty shyness in her broken speech.

"And loved each other. Can't you say it, little lady?"

"And loved each other," came the barely audible echo.

Of course Alick rewarded his obedient pupil, at the same time rewarding himself as teacher.

Then, as they passed the turn which brought them into view of the town, Myrtle drew a little more erect, though leaving her hand for the present on its comfortable support. She gained courage in speech, as well, and her face was very grave and earnest as she spoke next:

"I did promise, Alick, and I must keep that pledge sacred. If you would only look at the matter in a reasonable light, you would grant as much."

"I believe I am the reasonable one, this time, Myrtle," seriously answered McGregor. "You are no longer a little child, but plenty old enough to elect and act for yourself. If Sprague was at all reasonable in his likes or his dislikes, 'twouldn't be nearly so bad, but you know he is not. I am perfectly able to take care of a wife, and you are old enough to choose your life-mate. Now, aren't you, pet?"

"Old enough, perhaps, but—my promise, Alick! Hawley Sprague now represents my poor, dead father. I can not fly in the face of his commands, and—"

"Suppose he was to command you to marry Gilbert Sprague, would you feel in duty bound to comply with his wishes?"

"No, for that would be exceeding the authority of even a real father. But so long as he frowns upon your suit, Alick, I must submit. Isn't it enough to know that I love you, wholly, entirely, far above all the world else? And if I vow to do as you wish, the very day I am twenty-one, oughtn't that content you, dear?"

"If I said yes, you'd scorn me, Myrtle, and you'd be right, for it would be a lie! I'll never rest content until you are mine, wholly and solely mine!"

"I'm glad of it!" impulsively acknowledged Myrtle, with a charming flush upon her fair face, yet skillfully evading his attempted embrace. "Not now—somebody'll see us, you silly goose!"

"Confound somebody, then!" with a rueful sigh, as he thrust both hands behind his back, clasping them tightly as an aid to resist temptation. "But, make me glad, Myrtle! Say you'll let me face down old Sprague, and argue, coax, frighten, or—kick him into consenting?"

"I'll do no such thing, sir! And you ought—Oh, Alick!" her forced lightness vanishing as by magic. "Please don't make it too hard for me! I dearly wish I might say yes! I'd be fully as happy as you! But I feel bound by that promise—given to the dying, Alick!"

"Bound to yield when that old rascal orders you to marry his foppish cub, too, no doubt!" unreasonably growled the young hot-head.

Myrtle turned her face away, with a hurt murmur, only to give a sudden start as she caught sight of a tall figure on the bridge ahead.

"Go, Alick, dear! There's Mr. Sprague, now! Please go—I beg!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STERN OLD GUARDIAN.

MCGREGOR'S first thought was that Gilbert Sprague had hastened to the bridge by means of which Myrtle must cross the river, to intercept them, possibly with a view to renewing his quarrel, but his first glance in that direction told him different.

This was a taller, slimmer figure, dressed in sober gray, from head to foot, the single exception being the wide weed worn about the tall hat; the badge of mourning by which Hawley Sprague was known to every citizen of Eureka at sight.

Since his temper had cooled so materially, Alick might have consented to what, under different circumstances, would have looked something like flight, rather than still further agitate the girl he loved so passionately; but as he caught sight of the banker, he knew that they had been observed by the banker in his turn.

Hawley Sprague was on the further, or town side of the little river, at this point flowing deep and silently between high banks, a transfer being effected by means of the wooden-floored and wooden-railed bridge, forming part of the regular stage route, and across which the heavy traffic due the mines and reduction works of Barker Brothers rumbled to or from Eureka.

His tall, slender form was drawn rigidly erect, and one bony hand was holding the ring of his *pince nez*, through the polished glasses of which his still keen black eyes were staring as though unable to fully believe his own evidence.

"It's too late for me to cut and run, little lady, even if I felt like so doing," said Alick, with a touch of grim humor in his voice. "The old gentleman has caught sight of us, judging from his stare."

"I wish—if only—you will not quarrel with him, Alick?"

"Not if I can help it. If 'twas his cub, now!"

"Nor with Gilbert! Promise me that, Alick! You will avoid a quarrel with even him—for my sake?"

"Gilbert?" with a touch of contempt in his tone. "Oh, never you worry as to that, pet. He'll bark and snarl, maybe, but never come to closer quarters while a lady is not near enough to insure him immunity. And so—I promise!"

Hawley Sprague was still motionless, still staring at the young couple across the little river.

"You see, Myrtle, I can't leave you now, with him watching. 'Twould look entirely too much like running away, and you wouldn't care to see me branded as a coward, dear?"

"No, but—I'm sorry it's happened just so!"

"So am I, for your sake, little girl. Not for my own, though! Since it *had* to come, why not now? At worst, he can only forbid me the house."

While speaking, McGregor was moving forward, holding Myrtle's hand on his arm, despite her attempt to draw it away; and in his wholesome wish to show his independence, he came perilously near assuming an air of bravado as their feet struck the bridge.

Myrtle was too seriously troubled to take note of this too defiant demeanor, but even if she had, there was no time to remonstrate. The bridge was not a long one, and Hawley Sprague was slowly moving forward as though to meet them, pausing again as they gained the solid ground.

McGregor gave a stiff little nod as he encountered that glassy stare, but the banker gave no recognition for the instant, his cold, stern voice being directed toward his ward:

"You are acting very rashly, my child, to speak with moderation. I have repeatedly warned you against strolling in the hills, without a proper escort, and now you see the result: annoyed by a vagabond!"

"Meaning me, I suppose, Mr. Sprague?"

"Guardy—Mr. Sprague—don't!"

"If you had paid attention to my warning, Myrtle, this could never have happened. As it is, I'll take measures against the like ever happening again. Such worthless vagabonds—"

"Bide a wee, Mr. Sprague!" curtly interrupted the agent, his face flushed with anger, but his voice betraying a partial restraint. "Miss Um'reville has met no worse vagabond than your hopeful cub. I saved her from his unwelcome attentions, and was escorting her home when you barred the way—like this!"

Hawley Sprague turned his glasses toward the agent, his chin thrust forward, his thin nostrils quivering as though offended by an unpleasant odor. His clear-shaven lips curled with scorn. His entire person displayed strong dislike, if not active hatred.

"Ah! you are—Pray who may you be, fellow?" he drawled, affectedly, never flinching from that hot gaze, nor showing that his ears caught the little cry of indignation which broke from the maiden's lips at seeing her lover so openly insulted.

"You know who I am, sir, and that only your gray hairs give you license to insult a man who, thank Heaven! is your equal in all save money alone! Still, if you insist: I'm Alick McGregor, white, free-born, no man's lackey, but the devoted servant of this lady!"

"Ah—yes—I see! Alick McGregor, eh? Well, Alick McGregor, did you mistake my ward for the Gold Coin Venus?"

Myrtle shrunk away from both men, with a stifled cry. The younger man smothered an oath. The elder gentleman dropped his provoking drawl, to add in crisp, cold tones:

"Go keep your appointment with Lady Venus, Alick McGregor, lest she console herself with another one of her many lovers, for—"

"Stop!" harshly cried the agent, his clinched hand rising, only to drop as swiftly, for Myrtle sprung in between.

"For shame, sir!" her indignant eyes turned toward Sprague, her hands given to the other.

"You insult me, in abusing him!"

"And injure yourself far more than your scandalous tongue can harm either of us, Mr. Sprague," said McGregor, his face flushing only to pale and flush again, his eyes almost black with hot passion. "You shall eat those foul words, if not now, the first time I can find you when no lady can step between."

"I have said no more than is susceptible of proof, Alick McGregor, and my gray hairs need not hinder you from—"

"Go, dearest!" agitatedly whispered Myrtle, turning her back upon the banker, her hands resting appealingly upon the agent's shoulders. "For my sake, I ask it! Go, now, but—I will see you again—soon!"

"Not with my consent, child," coldly said Hawley Sprague, his hand touching her arm with gentle force. "I repeat it: never again shall you degrade my lost friend's daughter by meeting this knave on an equal footing. And you, Alick McGregor, go your way, and go at once! This lady is my ward, a legacy of love, as well as by law. I will take charge of her, now and for the future."

"Go—for my sake, Alick!" added Myrtle, her pale face flushing warmly as she lifted her lips to his for a single kiss, then drew back to her guardian's side, saying: "I am ready, Mr. Sprague. Let us go home."

It was a proof of honest love such as few women would have been capable of giving, under like circumstances, but it hardly produced the precise effect Myrtle intended. His blood leaped still more hotly through his veins, and Alick McGregor took a step forward, as though he would then and there claim and hold his own.

Possibly he might have made the attempt, only for catching sight of several lounging shapes not far distant. The knowledge that curious eyes were turned that way, came just in time to hinder his exposing Myrtle to still keener embarrassment.

"We are attracting attention, dear," he said, with forced calmness. "For your sweet sake I'll say no more than this: *we shall meet again*, and that right soon! Now go, and Heaven bless you—*my love, my bride!*"

"Never that, while I draw the breath of life, you drunkard, gambler, companion of vile women!" sternly cried Sprague, then almost forcing Myrtle away from the spot.

She offered no resistance whatever, being too greatly shaken by all she had undergone, feeling weak and ill now that the reaction from strong emotions had come upon her.

Nor did Hawley Sprague waste time or breath in further speech while moving toward his home. He was already regretting his unusual violence, into which he had been hurried by a sense of danger to the fond hopes he had been cherishing of late.

Still, knowing that he had said too much not to say more, he tried to steady his shaken nerves, and to pick the worst he must use when they were in a more suitable place for talking on such subjects.

Entering the house, Hawley Sprague led the way directly to his own particular room, on the ground floor, a combination of office and study. Not until the door was closed behind them, did he drop the band of his fair ward.

"Be seated, dear child," he said, in grave but kindly tones, as he placed a chair. "I must beg you to hear my excuses, for—"

"If not, I'd ask for them, sir!" almost sharply interposed Myrtle. "You have shamefully insulted me, sir, by— Oh, how *could* you!"

Her head bowed, her hands hiding her face. Sobs shook her figure, and hot tears trickled through her slender fingers.

Hawley Sprague moved a bit nearer, but then drew back, thinking better of the impulse. It was not sympathy Myrtle needed, nearly so much as kindly advice, sober counsel, he told himself.

"Possibly I might have acted with greater wisdom, child," he began, in clear, even tones. "I might even have displayed greater kindness, if my honest indignation had not gotten the better of me, just then."

"You were cruelly unjust—to him!"

"To you, possibly, child, but never to that vulgar scoundrel!" sternly amended the guardian. "I wish I might spare you such disgusting details, but after what I have seen—after the impulsive display you made by the bridge—I have no alternative. Yet, will not a single sentence avail, Myrtle? If I pledge my honor as a man, as your dead father's friend, that Alick McGregor is wholly unfit to associate with you?"

"I should say that you—are misinformed, sir!" cried Myrtle, her head lifting proudly, her eyes fairly aglow with indignation. "From any other lips, I'd say 'twas a base lie, sir!"

Hawley Sprague frowned darkly, biting his nether lip until it shone redly even in that subdued light. His voice sounded colder, sterner than before, and he at once plunged into the heart of the matter.

"I thought to spare you details, child, but since you will not listen to reason, hear to blunt facts. Alick McGregor is a drunkard, a gambler, a common roisterer, who openly boasts of the favor shown him by the woman gambler, called the Gold Coin Venus."

"I don't—I will not believe it, sir!"

"Do you accuse me of lying to you, Myrtle?"

"No, sir, not just that," her face paling a bit before that stern gaze. "Only that you have been misinformed. Alick McGregor is a gentleman, if ever mortal man deserved that title. I know, because—I love him!"

Hawley Sprague smiled faintly at this truly feminine argument, but he winced as well. While he would have objected to his ward's falling in love with any other man in Eureka, save his son, he had particular reasons for disliking the one she had elected to her heart of hearts.

"It is only the morbid fancy of a silly child," he coldly said, after a brief pause. "No doubt I have been to blame for granting you such latitude, yet—how could I restrain my old friend's daughter?"

"You could not, sir!" with an indignant flash in her eyes. "True, I am your ward, but I am not a slave! I will have my liberty, and if you are wise, you will not attempt to restrict that, Mr. Sprague!"

"We are straying from the main point, child," he said, coldly, without answering her half-demand, half-threat. "You say I am mistaken in bringing these charges against Alick McGregor. I repeat them, one and all. I stand ready to bring forward my proofs, if you insist upon my so doing. But—will you not take my fatherly assurance, child?"

"Never—on a point like this, Mr. Sprague. I love Alick McGregor, even as he loves me. I have promised to marry him, as soon as your consent can be gained—"

"That consent will never be given, Myrtle."

"Then, on the day your guardianship ceases, sir," bowed Myrtle, outwardly as cold and resolute as the banker himself.

"So you say, now. But, long before that day comes, you shall learn to know this fellow as others know him: if Lady Venus, the faro-dealer of the Gold Coin Saloon, does not marry him in the mean time!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A CURSE FOR A LIFE.

DESPITE that impulsive kiss, those loving words, Alick McGregor felt far from satisfied as he stood moodily watching those receding figures.

Already he could see where he might have given better, keener, more vital retorts to the insults flung in his face by Hawley Sprague. And then, gray hairs or no, hadn't he ought to have smote the lips that tried to plaster him with shame and humiliation?

"I'd ought to have broken his head! Or slapped his jaws, anyway! To have him bring the name of *that* woman—confound the fellow!"

Alick clinched his hands until the nails bit into his palms, and he sent a black scowl toward the loungers who had shown a faint degree of interest in that meeting.

They had slouched off, and were now out of sight. That was just as well, perhaps. McGregor was in a fitting mood for a row with somebody, just then, and he would not have been any too particular as to that somebody, either!

"First the cub, then the old bear!" he mut-

tered, his head bent low and his shoulders slouched as he slowly moved across the bridge, without much of an idea whither his steps were trending. "Why didn't I tell him to send me those insults by his cub, as bearer? If so—"

He gave a little start, catching his breath sharply. What had he promised Myrtle, when she begged of him so prettily? Not to quarrel with Gilbert Sprague, for her sake?

"Let him keep out of my path, then!" he muttered, with an increase of moodiness. "If he was to cross it now, I'd— *The devil!*"

If not that mythical personage, it was one whom Alick detested even more heartily.

Coming toward the bridge, and only a few rods distant, was Gilbert Sprague!

McGregor halted, flushing hotly, then turning white with anger, for the moment at a loss just how to act. If he had not passed his word! If Myrtle had not extorted that unlucky pledge!

Feeling himself bound by honor to avoid a quarrel, if he had caught sight of the bank cashier in time, Alick would have forced himself to beat a retreat as the surest method of keeping his pledge inviolate. But now—with those eyes upon him?

Upon him they were, and their owner clearly put an evil construction on that abrupt halting, for Gilbert Sprague called forth:

"Don't take to your heels, Alick McGregor! It's entirely too warm weather for a chase, though I'm thinking that's about the only sport a gentleman can hope to win from you!"

With a few rapid strides the agent left the bridge and gained solid footing. Sprague, as though anticipating an attack, clapped his right hand to a pistol, the butt of which showed plainly at his hip.

McGregor laughed contemptuously as he took note of this action, his own hands at ease, his fingers empty as he spoke:

"Run? From you, Gil Sprague?"

"That wouldn't save you from a licking, fellow, so don't try it on."

"Don't try to show yourself a bigger fool than nature intended, Sprague, for that would be needless! You couldn't lick one side of me, even if that was paralyzed, and you know it!"

"I know that I'm no match for you, when it comes to blackguardism, but, all the same, I'm going to pay off what I owe you. So—draw, and defend yourself, sir!"

There was a bit too much frills in his tones and demeanor, perhaps, yet Gilbert Sprague clearly meant what he said: whatever his faults, he was no physical coward.

His right hand gripped the butt of a revolver, but as yet he made no actual move toward drawing. He was gentleman enough to give his detested rival fair play, in that respect, at least.

Alick McGregor turned paler still, as was his wont when his passions fought for the upperhand of his reason. He was no ordinary fire-eater, and had never yet engaged in a street fight, so-called; but one less a craven never trod in shoe-leather.

If Myrtle had not extorted that unlucky pledge!

"You will play the fool, Gil Sprague?" he forced himself to say, with outward calmness.

"No, but I mean to read a rogue a lesson!"

"By shooting an unarmed man, I suppose?"

"Bah!" with a short, scornful laugh. "A cad of your caliber would be afraid to walk the streets in broad sunlight, without a gun. Draw, I say! Or, must I kick you into a semblance of grit?"

Whether he knew it or not, young Sprague was playing with fire, just then. His loud, taunting tones reached far in that clear, dry atmosphere, and already attention was turning that way.

The same fellows whose unwelcome curiosity had annoyed McGregor only a short time before, had not passed clear beyond earshot, and now, like vultures sighting a feast, they came greedily toward the bridge, one of their number sending forth a shrill, well-known cry, which would certainly add others to their number, all eager to "see the circus!"

"Shut up, you ranting ass!" angrily growled Alick, a motion of his head calling attention to these spectators. "Do you want the entire town staring at you?"

"The more the merrier," promptly retorted Sprague. "Maybe their coming may lend you a bit of backbone: Heaven knows you stand in need of it, or you wouldn't have kept me waiting this long!"

"You mean to force a fight upon me, then?"

"If it calls for force, yes! Only a curish cad would wait to be forced, though! Will you draw, Alick McGregor?"

"No! I would not, even if I was heeled, which I am not," and then he moved a little nearer, sinking his tones as he hurriedly added: "I was forced to promise Miss Umfreville that I would avoid any quarrel with you, Sprague. Knowing this—"

"How do I know that it's not simply a lie, to save your hide?"

"You do know it, sir, for I tell you so. And so knowing, if you still persist in crowding me, you're a cowardly whelp!"

If the young fellow had been cool in heart as

he seemed on the surface, he would have known that the simple truth was being spoken, and it is more than probable that he would have accepted the situation as it stood. But his recent defeat rankled deeply, and he gave a loud, mocking laugh as he cried:

"Free show, men of Eureka! Roll up, tumble up, any way to get up! Come and gaze your fill upon the latest attraction! A cad who apes the gentleman! A cur who was bold enough to snarl and make a show of his teeth so long as he was protected by the presence of a lady, who—"

"Stop, you dog!" fiercely cried the agent, pale as a corpse, but with his eyes ablaze. "Bring the name of that lady into this squabble, and I'll break your neck, pledge or no pledge!"

Their worst passions uppermost now, neither of the rivals seemed to be aware of the rapidly-increasing crowd, unless those warning words be taken as evidence in McGregor's favor.

Hardly more than a couple of yards of space divided the men, and with a cat-like leap, Gilbert Sprague crossed that interval, his left palm sharply striking the agent on one cheek, another swift bound carrying him back to his former position, his revolver flying out of its pocket-holster.

"Draw and defend yourself, you cowardly cur!" he cried, viciously, fairly beside himself with hot rage and longing for revenge.

Alick seemed taken by surprise, and his cheek was tingling as with a wash of fire, before he fully realized what was taking place. The shock, added to his instinctive start, caused his hat to fall over his face, to be caught as it dropped further, by one hand.

As though rebounding by the force of its own fall, the stiff derby flew forward, striking Sprague fairly in the face, disconcerting him in turn.

It was an old border trick, which has saved many a good man's life when nothing else could so surely serve, and right well did Alick McGregor follow it up.

A single leap carried him to his rival, and as his hand caught the pistol by barrel and cylinder, the weapon was discharged in the brief struggle which ensued.

The witnesses, with the customary care for themselves which ever forms a ludicrous episode in all street fights, ducked their heads and scattered in hot haste, seeking cover; but neither of the struggling rivals saw or heard them.

With a fierce twist Alick broke the grip of his rival, the same force sending the pistol whirling through the air to a safe distance.

Sprague, cursing viciously, tried to snatch forth his knife, but the agent was thoroughly aroused, now, and flinging all his weight into the effort, he shot out his right fist, striking his rival fairly between the eyes, sending him reeling, staggering backward—to fall over the nearly perpendicular bank of the river!

A wild cry of mingled rage and terror came back as the cashier disappeared from view of his rage-blinded antagonist. A loud splash came next, and another cry—choking, strangling, full of unadulterated horror!

"He's tuck water, anyway!" recklessly cried one of the grinning roughs who had been drawn to that spot by the chance of seeing sport.

But Alick gave a hoarse cry of regret and doubt as he brushed a hand across his eyes, to see—vacancy!

Another choking cry—an appeal for aid—caused him to spring to the bank over which he had so unwittingly knocked his rival, to catch a glimpse of the man as he floundered clumsily in the deep water already borne some yards down-stream by the current.

"Help! I can't—swim! Save—"

Instantly all rancor fled, and only a generous sympathy for endangered humanity remained. That, and a sickening sense of murder!

Without stopping to remove even coat or boots, Alick McGregor leaped down the steep bank, only striking earth once in those twenty-odd feet, and that touch sending him headlong into the river! But he found time while taking that leap, to shout aloud:

"Help! he can't swim!"

Confused by that fall, rather than leap, Alick yet retained fair control of his wits, as well as strength, and while making all haste to gain the side of the frightened fellow, he tried to see the safest method of making that a rescue, not a double tragedy.

Thinking it easy enough, but carrying out one's thoughts is quite a different matter, and so McGregor found it now. For, the instant he was near enough to reach out a helping hand, Gilbert Sprague made a frantic plunge toward him, and then Alick knew what the grip of a man in peril of death by drowning means!

Both sunk below the surface, Alick fighting to free himself in order to save, Gilbert only bent on clinging to something more solid than water!

Bare words are insufficient to give even a dim idea of a fight for life like this: only those who have passed through the horrible ordeal can realize what the words mean, as the present writer can testify.

For what seemed an age that horrible contest lasted, but then Alick managed to break away, by drawing up his legs until his feet caught a

fair purchase against the breast of his rival. Then—air!

After this it was not so hard, for Sprague was exhausted by that struggle, and still further weakened by strangling with water. And fastening a firm grip on the back of his neck, holding him at arm's length, pushing him on ahead, McGregor slowly, painfully neared the edge of the water, at a point far below the bridge, where there was footing sufficient to contain their eager assistants.

Gilbert Sprague was nearly unconscious when dragged forth from the river and carried up to the level. Alick was not much better, though he smiled faintly as he declined the proffered aid.

"I'm all—right. Look—to him," he panted, faintly.

After all, no great harm had come to either of the rivals, as a hasty examination proved when the level above was gained. And Gilbert Sprague drank quite freely from a proffered whisky-flask five minutes later.

Alick had lingered to assure himself that no serious results were to be dreaded, but then he started to leave. Only to hear Gilbert Sprague call after him with unabated rancor:

"Curse you, Alick McGregor! I'll even all up with you mighty soon! I'll kill you, or you've got to kill me, you cur!"

CHAPTER IX.

A COLD DAY FOR BREEZY BOB.

DEATH seemed inevitable when, at the cold commands of his superior officer, John Dogood pressed the muzzle of the revolver given him, fairly against the breast of the friend his rashness had led into trouble.

Robert Breeze had felt that his last moment had come, but he was too thoroughly hampered to fight for his life, and too brave a fellow to please his pitiless captors by begging for the mercy he felt sure was not to be found in their composition.

Whatever he may have felt inwardly, not a sign of fear or agitation could be seen on the surface by those dim lights. Certain it is that Bob Breeze seemed far less shaken at thoughts of being murdered, than John Dogood was at being forced to slay.

It was more to steady his trembling hand than through malignity, that the renegade pressed the muzzle of his weapon so sharply against the breast of his former friend. Then—closing his eyes with a shiver of sick horror, he pressed on the trigger hard enough to lift the hammer—then let it fall!

Only a dull click followed, in place of the muffled explosion which was to announce one more brutal assassination!

John Dogood dropped the pistol as soon as the hammer fell, shrinking back, both hands flying up to his head as though he hoped to shut out the hideous sounds which surely must follow.

The masked chief likewise started aside, but with a far different purpose: he snatched a lamp from its perch, then thrust the smoky flame forward, eagerly scanning the face of the accused detective, breaking into a mocking laugh as he took note of that unusual pallor.

Yet the man from Chicago was bearing that ordeal with wonderful strength of mind and body. He never for an instant doubted but that his death was intended, and in these days of fixed ammunition, even the most sanguine would be a rank idiot to calculate on the chance of a defective primer.

Not one man in a hundred could have kept his feet when the reaction came, after this fashion, and hardly one out of a thousand could have found his tongue so quickly, let alone speak without a tremor in his tones, as Bob Breeze did, just then:

"Where do you steal your shells, old man? Tell me, so I can purchase mine across the street!"

"Never mind, Robert! There was only one bad one in stock, and you happened to run up against that very one. It'll never happen again, I give you my word of honor to that effect."

Picking up the weapon which had fallen to the floor, the chief turned toward John Dogood. He, far more agitated than his once friend, had staggered back until saved from falling outright by the rock wall.

"Get a brace on, old man!" came the words, as his master tapped his shoulder with the weapon. "If it breaks you all up just to play shoot a man, what'd become of you if it had to be done in dead earnest?"

"Play?" dully echoed the agitated knave.

"That's what I said, and here goes to prove it, Johnny!"

Holding the pistol in such a manner that there was no chance for doubt or error, he unlocked the frame, extracting the shell on which that last snap had been delivered.

It was but a shell: the empty case of a former shot!

"And I wasn't—you didn't mean—"

"You was on trial, John Dogood, and if your grit had quite failed you, I'd have dropped you like an egg-sucking cur! As it is—you really expected death to follow your pulling trigger?"

Dogood nodded. He was too weak to trust his tongue, just then.

"What do you say, brothers?" asked their master, flashing a glance over that semicircle. "Has the debt been paid, so far as John Dogood is concerned?"

"The debt has been paid!" came the customary chorus.

"And you are ready to receive him as a true brother?"

"We are ready to receive him as a true brother!"

The chief turned once more toward the knave who had been so hardly tested, but only to receive a husky, trembling mutter by way of thanks. Then, the reaction proving too great, John Dogood sunk to the floor, in a shivering heap.

A start assailed all present, for a sneering laugh rung forth, and he who felt that grim mirth, gave explanation:

"A fitting brother, truly! If you numbered ten thousand, there *might* be sand enough in the lot, if collected, to fit out one half-way decent lad. Sing, brothers, sing!"

"And you, Bob o' the Breeze, sing—*smaller*."

"I said I wanted to join the gang, but I eat my words, if Johnny is a fair sample of the crowd."

"May I venture a hint, most noble captain?" asked the second in command, who had been watching and taking notes, apparently.

"Well, what is it?"

"That you are not only wasting valuable time by chaffing, but giving our would-be brother time in which to rally from the shock his nervous system sustained through Johnny and his gun. See?"

"A Daniel come to judgment!" mocked the man from Chicago, but the chief seemed far more deeply impressed by the wisdom of that hint.

"You're pretty nigh right, lieutenant, I do reckon," he said, with a nod of approval. "Now—just keep an eye on Johnny, will you?"

"Hasn't he paid scot, captain?"

"I may want him, for all that. If he tries to make a sneak, just step on his tail, will you?"

"Sure!"

The leader turned toward the man still in bonds, and by the light yet in hand, seemed studying his face intently. Bob Breeze bore that scrutiny well, but presently his tongue broke loose:

"You need a descriptive catalogue, captain. It's the face of an honest man you're looking at, but I reckon that's all Greek to you!"

"You may be all right, Robert, and then again you may be *all wrong*," coldly said the outlaw, holding out the tin lamp for one of his men to replace in its niche. "You may be an honest crook, but, again, you may be a cursed spy!"

"So many bees deserve a hive, boss. With a bit of starching, that head-dress of yours would make a fancy one! But—what're you going to do about it, anyway?"

"Talk about ice!" softly ejaculated the facetious lieutenant. "Ugh! hug me in a blanket, somebody!"

"Quiet, all!" sternly cried the chief. "I'm doing this side of the chin music. And now—Bob Breeze, unless you can plainly prove that you are just what you claim, I'll put out your light with my own hand!"

"Well, what's the matter with trying me by the same old test?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Business, if I can catch the slightest hint of an opening, old man. You let Johnny Nogood clear his record by trying to shoot me. Let me clear my title clear by busting a cap at you, captain, darling!"

The lieutenant used hand and hood to smother a laugh at this cool proposal, but from his tones the chief saw little to laugh at, and he growlingly exclaimed:

"This is no joking matter, Robert Breeze! You came here like a spy, with hidden face, and with stolen signs. That alone ought to condemn you, but I'm as slow to doom as I am swift to punish when conviction has been fairly reached. Once more, can you prove your honesty?"

"If I could, I wouldn't! Want to make me fit the noose about my neck with my own hands, boss?" drawled Breezy Bob, with a droll look of injury on his face. "If you had taken *dishonesty*, now!"

"Playing on words won't save your skin, my man. You know my meaning; answer it!"

Bob Breeze dropped his feigned airiness, speaking steadily:

"I have told you the naked truth, sir. I have no other method of proving my sincerity. Trust me, and I'll serve you. If not—finish the job according to your own tastes! I'm through!"

For a brief space their eyes met, those showing through the hood seeming to glow as though touched with phosphorus. Then the chief turned from his prisoner, touching his next in command on an arm to signify his wish for a private consultation.

His face betraying no trace of fear or of suspense, Bob Breeze followed their movements

with his eyes, just as he had once before, when Johnny Dogood was on trial before his brethren.

That consultation ended in a mock test of fidelity; would this bring forth anything similar?

It was almost too much to expect, but a brave man never abandons hope while even the ghost of a chance lingers. And, whatever else he might be, Bob Breeze was brave; his recent bearing plainly proved so much.

As before, the officers did not consume much time with their consultation, and, as then, the young lieutenant resumed his place, while the chief faced the man on trial.

Bob Breeze was first to speak, though his quickness betrayed nothing of fear, hardly anything of anxiety.

"Well, boss, is it good-by, or good boy?"

"Don't you be in such a rush, Robert. If you are booked as a terrible example, you'll know it soon enough. A man can cross the great divide but once. It's a mighty long journey, they say, but you'll get to your final destination in plenty time to sup with your host."

"All right, my covey! I'll ask him to reserve a warm corner for your especial comfort."

"Do! But, first, let me talk a bit, for I hardly believe you fully understand just what sort of ducks you've tried to take a swim with!"

"Hell-divers, for a guess, captain!"

The retort was so apt, that even the chief joined in the laugh, which was started by his fun-loving lieutenant; but then an imperious gesture reduced all others to silence, and he said:

"Cracking jokes won't save you, Breeze, unless you can bring something better to back them up. Now, as I started to say, we are a gang of tough nuts, who mean to put money in our purses, to borrow your motto. And, in order to win, we stand ready to pay full penalty."

"I am the head of the gang, as you see. What I say, goes without dispute, for these good lads are my hands, even as I am their head. I plan, they execute. And the one who can obey with fewest questions, is the best hand of all!"

"Well, boss, if that's the main qualification, what's the matter with me? I had ten years' practice with the Pinkertons, and topped it off with two years at Joliet! Be sure, I didn't offer any suggestions to either warden or guards, at that hotel!"

"Then, you think you could blindly obey, when ordered to do a thing, Robert?" slowly asked the outlaw, a half-malicious echo in his tones, as though that query covered a trap of some description.

"If he who gave that order held full authority—yes!"

"If you were fully admitted as a member of this gang, you would recognize me as authority, then?"

"Bet your sweet life I would, boss!"

"And if I should happen to take the notion—if I were to put a gun in your hand and point out—say Johnny Dogood, yonder?"

"Lord love you, boss, you needn't wait for my full election for that sort of a job," grimly cried the prisoner. "I'd shoot—after taking a look to guard against another dummy shell!"

The outlaw gave a short, dry chuckle at that grim eagerness, but he showed no signs of setting the prisoner free. Instead, he drew a pistol from his belt, unlocking the frame and letting the cartridges fall out upon a hollowed palm. Each movement was made under the fair light of the nearest lamp, and unless he deliberately closed his eyes, Bob Breeze could not miss a single action.

"I'm sorry—honestly sorry, Robert, but—this is a terribly cold day for you! You've run up against about the nastiest bit of hard luck a fellow of your size ever struck!"

"In other words, your honor?" coolly asked the detective.

"In other words, Robert Breeze, you may be all that you claim, but we've only got your bare word for it, and *that* don't go. If O. K., I do reckon you'd make a first-class agent but—take notice that I'm not loading with empty shells, please!"

Filling each chamber, snapping the frame shut, twirling the cylinder over his flattened palm to make all sure, the outlaw added:

"Pray, if you can, Robert Breeze, for in just two minutes you die!"

CHAPTER X.

A CHANCE FOR A RECORD.

"I DON'T know how, or I wouldn't be caught in a gang like this!"

Cool and even as were the sentences let fall by the chief, came these words, and Bob Breeze unflinchingly met that keen gaze. A grim smile came into his own face as he caught a low mutter as of admiration for his iron nerve, and he gave a slight nod in the direction of the masked lieutenant.

"Good manners says thanks for the compliment, pardner! And yet—mighty little share of it falls on *your* side of the fence!"

"Meaning—just what?" asked the young outlaw.

"That there must be a woeful lack of sand in your family, if you feel like cheering a man who shows an odd grain or two."

"Good boy Bob! I say, captain!"

"Well, say it! Time passes, and I've got to make my word good."

"That's the very point I'm trying to touch, captain," said the second in command, advancing, with a placating gesture of his gloved hand. "Must you put out his light?"

"Don't you know better than to ask such a fool question, sir?"

"Apparently not," with a soft, unabashed chuckle. "Somehow I can't help feeling pretty nigh half-way sure you're making a mistake in this, captain. If a genuine crook, he'd prove a rare ornament to the profession—don't you think?"

"If that's the point, lieutenant. Will you be his guarantee? Will you pay the full penalty in case he plays us dirt, after?"

The young fellow drew back at that blunt question, shrugging his shoulders, to say:

"Oh, that's a horse of another color! I'm willing to take my full share of the risk, and swear in as Robert a full-fledged member, but I draw the line at that. Every tub on its own bottom, captain!"

"You have said it, brother," with a stiff bow. "Fall back, please."

The lieutenant obeyed, his ardor plainly cooled by that reception, and once more the chief turned toward his prisoner.

Through this bit of by-play, Bob Breeze had betrayed no particular interest, although he glanced from one to the other as they spoke in turn. He was trying to decide whether or no this was genuine, or but part of a cunning scheme to test his nerve, much as Johnny Dogood had been put to the test shortly before.

He had not fully made up his mind when the end came, and he was once more confronted by his stern judge.

"Time is flying swiftly, Robert, and your life-lease is keeping it close company. I really hate to do it, but—self-preservation is the first law of nature, you understand?"

"You're spinning the wheel, boss, and I know the odds against my catching the little ball."

"You can't well miss catching *this* one, old man!" grimly chuckled the outlaw, lifting his pistol until its cool muzzle touched the helplessly bound man fairly between the eyes. "The only comfort I can give is that 'twill be quickly over. My gun can discount a mule, with the advantage to its owner of kicking ahead, not to the rear. Now—"

The rapid echo of heavy footsteps came to all ears, just at that instant, and recoiling with a fierce ejaculation, the outlaw chief faced the entrance, just in time to meet the incoming of a hooded shape, who pantingly spluttered:

"Comin', boss! They're in sight—way back by the—"

"Silence, you fool!" harshly growled his master, bringing his gun to bear on the messenger.

"No names! Only—you're sure?"

"I ketched the sign, an' I don't reckon he'd resk a lie, boss," the knave said, shrinking from that menacing front.

"Keep an eye on him, you fellows, while I go see what's up," hastily spoke their master, putting up his pistol, then beckoning the lieutenant to follow. "Come, boy, show the way, and if there's no mistake—"

His concluding words were lost to Bob Breeze as the trio hurriedly passed out of sight toward the front of the cavern.

To say that the prisoner was deeply interested, would be to proclaim him either more or less than human. He was intensely interested in the outcome; no man could be more so. Yet his face betrayed nothing at all to those curious eyes.

His brain was wonderfully busy, though. He was trying to solve the doubts which had troubled it ever since that farce of the empty shell.

Up to the instant when that hammer fell without sounding his death-knell, Bob Breeze had counted his life-career as good as ended. After that, he clung to hope, none the less precious because he was outwardly so breezily reckless.

Was it all part of the regular routine? Did each aspiring member have to pass through just such a trying ordeal before attaining the proud title of brother? Was this opportune interruption, part of that complicated initiation?

Enough to fill even the busiest of brains, surely!

Bob Breeze had not yet solved those important doubts, when the hooded chief came hastily back to the dimly lighted chamber, a quick gesture of his gloved right hand stilling the stir which caught his servants.

"False alarm, brothers! That is, *something* was sighted, but not our particular game, you understand? Yet—Robert Breeze?"

"Oh, I'm all here, your honor," came the dry response. "Couldn't think of being so impolite as to skip out without first bidding you good-by, and receiving your blessing, sir!"

"Simmer, you fool!"

"Simmer goes, brother," with meek sarcasm.

"I fully intended to make all sure by blowing out your brains, if you've got any, but— I'll give you a chance for your life!"

"Free my hands, boss, and see how mighty quick I'll catch on!"

"My man reported travelers coming along the stage trail, and I made sure that he hadn't made an error. Now—if I set you free and give you back your guns, will you hold them up?"

"Will you really give me that chance, captain?"

"There's two of them: one man, one woman. Will you held them up, and fetch the woman back here, captive?"

"Just the woman, do you mean?"

"I mean both of them, unless he's fool enough to show fight so hard that you'll have to drop him to save your own hide. Will you do it?"

Bob Breeze hesitated for an instant, trying to catch a square look at those masked eyes, but in vain. Then he asked:

"Am I to go alone, or under guard, captain?"

"Alone, of course."

Breeze gave a short, dry laugh before saying: "Isn't that a bit risky, boss, after pelting me with such hard words? To say nothing of rubbing it in with the bonds?"

"What do you mean by risky?"

"Suppose I see fit to levant, instead of doing the hold-up act?"

"Then all doubts will be solved. I'll know you are the cursed spy I first believed, and we'll hunt you to the death!" came the coldly fierce retort.

There was a brief silence, broken by the prisoner.

"And if I turn the trick to your taste, captain?"

"I'll spare your life, and admit you to full membership. For, don't you see? Then we'll have just as firm a hold on you, as you can ever hope to gain on us. They hang men for holding-up out here, Robert!"

"Not before catching, though?"

"Will you never sober down, man?"

"Better laugh than moan, when the first comes so much easier, boss! Then—fretting brings wrinkles, and I'm still in the market! Worry enough after marriage—don't you reckon?"

"Business, man! Will you try to turn the trick? Last asking!"

"If I don't, you can get your crape in readiness, boss. I'll fetch 'em in, or you'll have to fetch me—toes up! Just turn me loose, to sort of limber up my twigs, captain."

The outlaw touched the knife that showed at his belt, but then refrained, for the present, saying:

"There's time enough, Robert, if I caught the report aright. The game was sighted on the ridge, something more than two miles from here, and there's a bit of tough picking in the hollow between, as you may know?"

"For horses, and a lady to steer, I reckon you're right, boss."

"I said I'd give you a chance to make a record, and a fair shake it ought to be. 'Twould be rather tough, steering you up against a force too heavy for even so good a lad to manage, eh, Robert?"

There was no reply, and, despite his nerve, Bob Breeze could not entirely control the muscles of his face. Was this the trap he more than half-believed was being laid for his discomfiture?

The captain laughed, shortly, as though amused by that sudden alteration, but his tones seemed sincere enough when he added:

"I'm going to run over far enough to make sure you can handle the job, Breeze. If there are only two, even if both are men, you'll not flunk?"

"Nor from anything less than half a dozen, sir," was the cool reply. "Still, I'd rather have 'em all men. I never could manage the fair sex with any degree of certainty."

"Well, you want to manage this one, or—understand?"

"Don't I? A blind man could see that point, and not half try!"

"Enough said, then. I'm not asking impossibilities of even you, man. If all's smooth out yonder, I'll let you know in good time. If the contract looks too large, I'll handle it myself. Only—if I were in your shoes, Robert, I'd pray they only numbered a couple!"

"Meaning what, captain?"

"That, this chance fading away, we'll have to fall back on the original proposition: and your grace has ticked out, long ago, Robert!"

Turning abruptly away, the chief drew one of the brothers aside, speaking to him in tones too low for the prisoner to catch, let him try his utmost. And then, without another word or even look toward the man on probation, the gray-hood passed out of sight in the gloom.

After a brief time, the outlaw singled from his mates by the leader, came toward the bound man, drawing a knife as he spoke in muffled tones:

"The boss said I was to cut ye loose, critter, so's ye could ketch yer limber back ag'in afore mooseyin'. Stiddy, now, an' don't think to come any o' yer monkey-shines over we-uns!"

"Don't you worry, pardner, for this bit of service makes me love ye worse than a brother!"

chuckled Bob Breeze, giving a long sigh of relief as he stretched out his cramped arms, then straddled stiffly to and fro, giving an occasional kick to take the kinks out of his legs.

Despite his seeming carelessness, both eyes and brain were at work. Without appearing to do so, he noted how surely his escape by way of the front entrance was cut off, supposing he should be rash enough to make such a venture.

That fact alone proved that he was still on probation, and helped thicken the muddle into which his usually keen, clear, acute wits had been thrown by this sudden alteration of affairs.

Was it a genuine chance which was about to be offered him? Was it really honest wayfarers whom he was expected to hold up at the point of his guns, or was it merely a seeming chance offered him, in hopes of his trying to escape by flight as soon as that cavern was left behind him?

"If so, that won't work!" was his first firm decision. "If I'm to croak, it's got to be unadulterated butchery. Unless—what's the matter with fighting the entire family?"

To a man of his cool, fearless nature, there was a peculiar attraction in this wild fancy, but it was not long entertained. If they really meant to trick him, such a chance would never be offered: enough would lie unseen, to drop him in his tracks before he could fairly fall to work.

After all, might it not be a genuine chance offered him, through which he might prove himself worthy admission as a brother? Might not this be part of the regular initiation?

Surely Bob Breeze had ample food for thought, and he did his level best to bring forth order from chaos, even while humming a tune with outward jollity as he "limbered up" his members, paying no attention to those grimly silent shapes who held him at their mercy.

He was still trying to unvail the truth, when a faint, peculiar whistle came floating through the air.

CHAPTER XI.

BOB BREEZE TURNS ROAD-AGENT.

It sounded so much like a signal, that Bob Breeze instinctively started toward the entrance, only to halt as weapons barred his path, and that muffled voice pronounced:

"Don't you git in a rush, critter! That's 'tended fer your betters 'stead o' fer you."

"All right; let my betters take it. But—I say, gentle monk?"

"Eh?"

"You own a cognomen? A handle? A name? Something to call you to the trough by?"

"What's that to you? Don't putt on frills afore you've ained the right, critter!"

"Thanks, awfully! If you're ashamed to tell your name, I don't suppose there's any use in my trying to coax you to reveal your angelic mug, is there? You wouldn't stoop so low as to grant me just one fair squint at what's lying back of that grain-sack?"

"What's ye tryin' fer to git through ye, anyway?"

"Just this, brother-to-come. I wanted to spot the face of the fellow who abuses his authority when he thinks his betters can't come back at him as he deserves. Of course it's awful to even think of rowing with one's relatives, but if I don't give you a solid thumping before my christening grows fairly cold, then it'll be because you've hid yourself away past my finding. Sabe?"

A round of chuckling greeted this bluff speech, and Breezy Bob felt that his breath had not been entirely wasted. Possibly he had made one enemy, but he had taken a long step toward the good graces of half a dozen other members.

For all that, he was keeping an eye toward the front entrance, eager to find out what that whistle meant, since it was not the signal for him to sally forth in his new role of road-agent.

Before the hooded knave could find fitting words for a retort, a shuffling of footsteps was heard, and a masked figure entered the dimly-lighted chamber. At first glance Bob Breeze took it for the chief, but the first words coming from behind that thick hood, told him different.

They came in a voice which, he was pretty certain, had never before saluted his ears.

"You haven't altered your mind, Bob Breeze?"

"About reading my title clear, you mean?"

"About doing the hold-up act?"

"Never a bit; why should I alter it? I'm only waiting for permission to don my regalia, and scoot!"

"You fully understand what you are expected to do, of course?"

"To hold up those persons now coming along the stage trail. To fetch them back here, captives; both, unless the male member kicks so loud I have to drop him by the way; but to fetch the fair pilgrim at any and all events. Isn't that about the programme, gentle brother?"

"Straight as a string, Robert. Now—scoot!"

"And my head-dress, brother?"

"Are you ashamed of your natural mug, Robert?"

"If I took time to tell you just how awfully I'm proud of it, dear brother, we'd come out in

the middle of next week. But—of course I *can* wear a hood?"

"When you have fairly won the right, not before. Go as you are, my pretty lad from Chicago, or—wait here for the captain to put the cap-sheaf on."

Bob Breeze saw what mischief lay back of this prohibition, and his strong face flushed angrily. Only for an instant, however. Then, still with his characteristic airiness, he added:

"All right, if that's the key, brother. It's only closing two more pair of eyes, and that sort of work comes easy with practice."

"You mean?"

"That your gentle pilgrims have only one choice: either get too badly scared to take note of my features, or else lose their memory before they can carry it to Eureka. Now—all set, brother?"

"All set, I reckon," but with a barely perceptible faltering in his tones. "You reckon you can find the trail all right?"

"In blinders, if I had to."

"Then—pull out! Do your duty, or pay the penalty!"

"Won't some of you fellows come along to see the sport? May be that I'll scare so bad it'll turn out a holy circus! Can't 'most always sometimes generally tell about these matters, and I never did the hold-up act before. So—"

"Oh, give your tongue a rest, Robert!" impatiently interjected the mask, gripping an arm and leading the novice toward the entrance. "If you are too late to cut them off, that'll pan out just as hot punishment for you as any other fluke. Now—get there!"

"You bet!"

Returning the second password, Bob Breeze brushed a hand across his eyes, which were forced to wink and blink by that bright sunshine, so different to the dim, smoky light to which he had grown accustomed.

His sense of locality had not been seriously disturbed by his rather peculiar experiences since passing from the light of day, however, and with that hint ringing in his ears, he moved on in the direction of the stage trail. Let what fate might await his venture there, as road-agent, it could hardly be worse than judgment, such as the outlaw chief would probably pronounce, and execute.

If he only knew just how much of this was farce, how much reality! If he could fairly determine whether this was a square chance offered him for proving himself worthy admission to that select family, or if it was but another bit of cat-and-mouse play.

"I'd give a finger to know just so much!" passed through his mind as he picked his way among the rocks which had, through unknown ages, separated from that towering mass beneath which the road-agent den was located. "Maybe 'twouldn't help me in out of the dampness, but I *do* know 'twould be some satisfaction to get, anyway, one bite, while the gang was making a square meal!"

It may well be doubted if ever road-agent sallied forth to do or die under precisely similar circumstances. For a novice, such as Bob Breeze proclaimed himself, the contract was sufficiently heavy, without the addition of a handicap like this.

Was he followed by the gang? Was his every movement being watched? Was he even then "lined" by the gun or revolver which had been picked out as his executioner?

Ugly thoughts, yet how could he avoid entertaining them?

"I'd be a blamed fool to reckon they'd turn me free, without keeping so much as an eye over me!" ran his reflections. "I don't advertise myself as a bundle of nerves, but—this is about the coldest day my mother's son ever stumbled up against!"

It was only by calling all his iron will into play, that Bob Breeze refrained from casting backward glances, to see if he was being dogged by the guard which had been so ostentatiously refused him. He felt morally certain that his every movement was being watched, but—it would be so great a relief to just *know*!

"Isn't that just what the malicious critters are playing for? An excuse to bowl me over, for my thinking of giving them the slip if not under guard! Well, see if I can't fool 'em in that, at least!"

Nerving himself after this fashion, Bob Breeze picked his way toward the stage-trail, quickening his movements as his eyes became accustomed to the bright sunshine once more. He was determined not to lose this chance of "reading his title clear" by delay on his own part, and yet he dared not exceed a walk, lest that be taken by the road-agents as a proof of intentional flight.

"A most delicious pickle, I *don't* think!" his grim thoughts ran along, keeping time with his feet. "If ever I loved a fellow-being to death, it's Johnny Dogood! And, if I could just manage a private interview with that precious pet—say half an hour, under lock and key, without the gloves—I could lay me down and rise up an angel, without half-trying!"

Without risking a glance behind him, Bob Breeze kept his ears on the keen alert, trying to gather from his sense of bearing whether or no

he was being followed by an armed guard. But he gained the stage-road without having made any such discovery.

Once there, he seemed all business. He bent over the flinty road looking for sign. It was barely possible that his game had made better time than ordinary, and had escaped the trap being set for them; but he hardly thought that way.

"If he's that sort of covey, then my summing-up is 'way off! If I was making haste too slowly, reckon he'd have flung a hint this way. Provided it's a genuine case, and not merely flim-flam!"

It was curious how that doubt kept recurring to his busy brain. He could not banish it for more than a minute or two at a time, to do his level best. And yet, was it so strange, after the trick which he had seen played upon Johnny Dogood?

Or—was that a trick? Was it not part of a regular initiation?

"Well, if 'twas, Johnny ought to tread the boards, for he's 'way up 'mong the stars as an actor, sure! Now—what comes next?"

He rose erect, hand on pistol, glancing swiftly up and down the road, like one who doubts which way he should head. At the same time his keen eyes were shooting glances sideways, looking for the guard which he felt morally sure had followed his footsteps from the cavern.

He neither saw nor heard aught to confirm this suspicion. If the gray-hoods were there they made no sign.

Bob Breeze had struck the road at the same point where Johnny Dogood had held him up, earlier in the day: a few rods nearer Eureka than the crest of that rocky divide. This gave him but a short view along the road in that direction, and as the quickest method of determining whether or no his designated game had passed by, he crouched low and trotted along the trail toward the summit.

He did not pass over it, for there was no need. He caught sight of a pair of riders slowly walking their animals up the slope, to all seeming without an idea of danger lying ahead.

"Good enough! Just keep up that lazy lick, and you're my meat, sure as snakes aren't cat-fish!" he said, in tones as loud as he dare use, mainly for the benefit of his guards, if such were within hearing.

He beat a rapid retreat to the spot where Johnny Dogood had lain in waiting, since a better point for springing a trap of that nature could hardly be found within his limits. And once there, he slouched his hat, turned up the collar of his dusty coat, looked to his pistols, making sure neither cylinder was clogged in its action.

If he was actually under inspection, Bob Breeze gave the road-agents no cause for uneasiness as to his intentions: the oldest hand among them all couldn't have acted better.

Presently he caught sight of a human head showing itself above the gray rocks forming the apex, and then another came into view alongside the first, both riders drawing rein when fairly at the summit, to give their animals time to breathe.

They were man and woman, as the report had been sent in, and from where he lay in ambush, Bob Breeze eagerly inspected them both.

The man was tall, with stooped shoulders and hollow chest, as though his lung-power was deficient. His face was pretty well hidden beneath a full beard, the gray hairs falling over his bosom in a patriarchal fashion, mingling with his long hair of silvery white as he lifted his hat to catch the faint breeze on his heated brow.

That removal gave Bob Breeze a fairer look at his face, and showed him what had until then escaped his notice: dust-goggles covered the eyes of the old pilgrim.

His companion, dressed in a neat gray habit, which was well calculated to defy the dust of travel, so far as looks went, was equally as well shielded: a gray veil was doubled over her face, knotted at the back of her head. Doubtless this was to baffle both sunshine and dust, but it served fully as well to foil the keen gaze which Bob Breeze bent in that direction.

"Might as well wear hoods!" flashed through his busy brain during that inspection, brief in duration, for the old man gathered up his reins and set his horse in motion, saying in shrill, peculiar tones:

"Reckon we'd better press on, child! 'Tis a weary jaunt for you, but Eureka can't be much further on, and there we'll find rest for the weary! I'm sure you richly merit so much, dear!"

"Don't be in such a rush, boss! Hands up, or I'll riddle you!"

CHAPTER XII.

ROBERT RESISTS TEMPTATION.

In true road-agent style that stern challenge rung forth, and taking pattern by the example set him by Johnny Dogood, Bob Breeze showed his head and shoulders above the white rock, each hand gripping a revolver, the sights lined with each of the pilgrims.

Sharp ejaculations burst from both man and

woman, and simultaneously they jerked up their startled mounts.

"Don't—a woman!" spluttered the old man, not too entirely cast off his balance to think of the weaker vessel.

"Don't you, my covey, an' the woman's all hunky," promptly retorted Breeze, shifting his aim to suit those shrinking movements. "I don't want to hurt ye, pardner, but—I'll have to do it if you try to jump over the toll-bar!"

"I don't— We're not— Confound you, fellow!"

"And I've found you, which, I'm open to lay odds, will pan out heap sight richer than Con's find. Up with your dukes, uncle! Don't fumble your fingers so mighty nigh the place where men tote their guns! See?"

"You are not— Oh, sir, surely you will not harm us?" faltered the fair pilgrim, recovering partial control of her womanly weapon.

"Never a harm will I harm, ma'am, providing you don't— Must I say it all over, uncle?" his tones growing dangerously sharp. "Hands up!"

The old man complied, though he swayed nervously in his seat as his uneasy horse showed signs of breaking away. But Bob Breeze guarded against that by stepping forth from his covert, easily moving nearer the heads of the animals, as the readiest method of calming their fears.

"And you, ma'am," his tones softening a bit, but with a motion of his pistol which could not be misinterpreted. "I reckon your pretty eyes can do the closest shooting, but I'm taking no extra risks this afternoon. Will you see how high you can lift those little paws of yours—please?"

"Don't abuse her, you— I mean, treat me as you see fit, sir, but spare my poor little girl!" pleaded the old man, his shrill voice sounding unevenly from strong emotion. "She's all I've got to—"

"Then I've struck a water-haul! Get out, you! Men don't travel with women in their train, nowadays, unless they've got ducats to pay for all the delicacies of the season! All you've got, eh?"

"I meant— Take my money if you must, but—"

"You bet I will, uncle! Reckon I'm holding you up just for the rare pleasure of listening to your musical chin-chin? Don't you think it, uncle, or you'll get left—bad!"

Bob Breeze was not talking simply through love of hearing his own voice, just then. His first glimpse of those two riders had given him a fresh suspicion, and he was playing for time in which to decide that, one way or the other.

That flowing beard and long hair seemed perfectly natural, yet, might it not be a cunning disguise, assumed for a purpose? Might not this be a final test of his sincerity? If really the detective the road-agents believed at first, it was natural to expect that, while seemingly sincere in his movements, he would let drop an assurance of protection or of rescue, as the surest method of effecting the capture without being forced to actual violence.

Was *this* the crucial test, after all?

As though the old gentleman divined his thoughts, he said:

"Take my money, sir, and let us go our way. It's enough to pay you richly, unless you've got others with whom to divide the plunder."

"Others?" echoed the amateur agent, scornfully, while sweeping his keen gaze covertly over that figure, seeking to solve those ugly doubts. "Reckon I'm a kid? Reckon I need a whole army to—"

His voice broke, despite his nerve, for, as his gaze lowered for an instant to the feet of his prisoner, he made a wonderful discovery; on the right boot, near the counter, on the outside, was a fresh scratch that contrasted with the surrounding blackness; a scratch shaped like a miniature horseshoe; and the exact counterpart of one he had idly noted on the boot of the outlaw chieftain!

The old man caught at that break, as with reviving hope, almost whispering in his eagerness:

"Let us go, my man, and I'll pay you richly! I've got papers—of no value to others, but very precious to my daughter, here! Let us go, and you'll never regret the deed of kindness!"

"Steady, you!" sternly cried Breeze, moving back a pace, the better to hold command of both persons. "This is pure business, and I'm its prophet! Hold steady your dukes until— I say, ma'am?"

"Oh, sir, what is it?" tremulously faltered the shrinking woman. "I beg of you, have pity! Don't kill—"

"I seldom do, unless I'm bothered a bit. And crying women bothers me past all endurance! So—swallow your tears, ma'am, and open your dainty ears to reason of the coldest cut. You understand?"

"I don't—I will—"

"Of course! Never knew a woman who couldn't fly both ways at one and the same time. But—keep your hands up, uncle, or I'll lay you down to sleep the snooze that never ends in *this* world!"

Robert was "playing to the gallery," now, and his really earnest wish to become one of the

family of agents, was not permitted to stand in the way of his present duty. His voice rung out stern and clear, and if his movements were being watched, as he more than suspected, he intended to give those spies the full worth of their money.

"I can't lift them any higher without climbing on my saddle," the patriarch retorted, sourly. "Must I do *that*, as well as submit to being so shamefully robbed?"

"Don't fling out any reckless hints, uncle, or I may freeze fast to some of them. I'm the worst fellow you ever met up with for jokes, and—reckon you *could* play circus-rider, daddy?"

There was no reply, save a sulky growl from the man, a smothered sob from the lady. This grim facetiousness apparently frightened them.

"You keep holding up, Graybeard, and you, Vailed Venus, attention!"

"Oh, kind sir, what can I do to—to please you? If only—"

"I'm just going to, sweetness. Keep your pretty paws heavenward for another second, while I—so fashion!"

Without releasing either of his weapons, Bob Breeze slipped the big bandanna from where it was loosely knotted about his neck, giving it a toss which sent it into the lap of the lady.

"Oblige me by binding that about the peepers of your father, ma'am, and then I'll come to the second move."

"What—I don't—"

"But you *will*, my angel of light. I ask it, and when I want a thing done, I want it *bad*! I beg of you, ma'am, don't wear out my stock of patience, for when that gives out, I've just got to play triggers!"

"Obey the ruffian, child," quickly said her companion in trouble. "Don't give him the excuse he evidently seeks, or—"

"Wisdom on horseback!" chuckled Breeze Bob, but still keeping his precious game covered. "Do your duty, pretty duck, I beg of you!"

He was now perfectly assured that the apparent patriarch was none other than he whom the road-agents called captain, and he shrewdly guessed that the lady, real or counterfeit, was he who had figured as second in command.

Granting that his surmises were correct, Robert knew pretty well that his orders, if confined to the duty assigned him, as a novice, would be complied with in peace, rather than run the risk of a shot from the guns he handled so deftly.

Still, he was not supposed to know what lay below the surface, and he never for an instant laid himself open to shot or stroke from either one of his prisoners.

"Do the job once for all, my precious poppet, for if he hasn't the use of his eyes, Daddy Graybeard will be less apt to fall through temptation. And—no tricks on travelers! If you try to snatch a gun for a snap-shot at your humble master, I'll shoot—and to kill!"

In seeming fear and trembling, the woman completed the task assigned her, and then withdrew to her former position. Bob Breeze added:

"Now, uncle, just climb down from that saddle, and don't forget that I'm keeping you under cover of as true a gun as you can find in all Idaho."

"But—"

"But me no buts, uncle, or you may catch a regular billy-goat counter, right where you live. I said—*climb down*!"

There was no resisting a tone like that, and using caution against a fall, which might be twisted into an attempt to escape, the man with the horseshoe-scratch alighted.

"Never mind your nag, uncle. If he pulls out, I reckon he'll stop when he gets tired. Straight ahead, this way—march! Hay-foot, straw-foot—halt!"

Breeze fell back as the other advanced, still keeping his game carefully covered. Since he had begun playing for his hidden witnesses, he would keep it up to the end.

"Now, ma'am, follow suit, if you please. Sorry I can't lend a hand, but mine are both full, as your bright eyes can readily perceive. Will you climb down, I say?"

Either terribly frightened, or else admirably counterfeiting terror, the woman obeyed that stern command, taking care to make no suspicious motions with her gloved hands while so doing. And then, giving her ample room, Breeze caused her to draw up alongside her companion, at the same time shifting his own position in order to place them both in his front.

He produced a second handkerchief, this time from a pocket, and as he folded it into a bandage, he warned:

"I'm going to blindfold you, as well, ma'am, and you needn't kick against it, either. Business is business, and this is it!"

"You are wasting much time, sir," almost sharply said the man, but without shifting his attitude lest still worse befall. "If it is money you want—let us go free, and I'll pay you enough to make you rich for the rest of your life! For reasons which—"

"For reasons which—and that's just what's the matter with *me*!" quoth the man from Chicago, as he deftly blindfolded the woman.

"And one of them sounds like this: if you carried all the gold and silver ever dug in Idaho, and you was to offer it to me for just that favor, I couldn't and I wouldn't grant it!"

"But—you don't know—"

"I know that I'm only a deck-hand, this trip, sir. Chin to the boss, when I fetch you face to face with him, but—give me a rest, or I'll be tempted to give you a soothing pill!"

Now that his prisoners were helpless, Bob Breeze knotted the bridle-reins of the two nags together, leading them far enough from the road to be hidden from any person passing, then hastening back to his more important prizes. Taking them by an arm each, he started them along the easiest course which would ultimately bring them to the cavern, at the same time letting drop a caution:

"Don't think you can jump the traces, friends, simply because you feel both of my hands. When I'm out on business, I carry a round dozen of 'em, and each of the extra ten hold you covered with a gun. *Sabe?*"

Once more the graybeard tried to tempt his captor, and the woman joined in with prayers that were full of sobs and seeming agitation; but to them all Breezy Bob turned a deaf ear, saying at last:

"I can tell by the flapping of your lips that you're chinning at a lively rate, both of ye, but I can't hear in one ear, and am stone deaf in the other. Maybe the boss will do better by ye, so bottle up the rest for his benefit. I was told to run you in, and in you go—or I bu'st a tug trying!"

As though in despair, the captives fell silent, meekly submitting to the guiding hands of their captor. He conveyed them in safety to the front of the cavern, seeing nothing of the road-agents by the way, and then, giving a whistle in fair imitation of the one which he had caught while in the cave, he awaited the results.

His patience was not severely tried. A cowed figure came into view, pistols in hand as if ready for use, and Bob Breeze airily cried:

"Here's your game, boss! One's a tough old rooster, from the looks of his comb, but—t'other's a mighty plump little pullet!"

"All right. You have done well, my man! I'll take charge of these people, and you can go fetch up their horses."

"Fetch 'em right in here, boss?"

"Yes. Off with you! And don't lose yourself by the way, either!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE.

THERE was a covert sneer attached to those words, doubly disagreeable to one who certainly had acquitted himself well of the task assigned him; but Bob Breeze, with all his outward recklessness, was far from being a natural fool, and could swallow many a tough morsel when self-interest dictated.

Affecting to see in those words a friendly caution, he cheerily replied:

"Lost? I don't reckon I could, boss, if I was to try it on. These very dear friends of ours have sprinkled the path with tears, until I could as easy stray from the trail of a sprinkling-cart in Chicago! Why, sir, don't you know, when I was—"

"Oh, bite it off!" growlingly interrupted the cowed shape. "You go fetch the critters, first thing. After that—we'll see!"

Bob Breeze seemed a bit abashed by this blunt snubbing, and without reply of any sort he set off in the direction of the stage trail, like one who had never a thought for aught else than compliance with orders.

Nevertheless he managed to steal a backward glance without too openly betraying his curiosity, and saw the outlaw who had tacitly accepted the role of chief, sending the captives ahead of him into the cavern.

"Maybe it doesn't amount to much, but when a fellow is hovering betwixt the devil and the deep sea, as 'twere, it's only the part of common sense to make a grab at each possible chance as it goes skipping toward the never-come-back-again. And so—they are in the den, eh? Wonder how they'll come out?"

Having testified to his willingness by the celerity of his start, Robert Breeze slackened his pace when a mass of rock shielded him from view of any one at or near the cavern. His face was blank, so far as betraying the workings of his brain was concerned, but back of that mask considerable thinking was going on.

There had been something in the manner and tones of him who had welcomed their coming to the cave which, whether so intended or not, left an uneasy sensation in the memory of the novitiate.

"Right there's the worst snag of all, or I'm no true pilot!" his reflections ran while he picked his way toward the point where he had left the animals secured. "Have I botched it, after all? Was it a mistake, my fetching in the game the boss pointed out? Did he really mean for me to drop them in the trail? If so—well, the quicker I skin out for other quarters, the likelier I'll be to wear gray hairs!"

And yet, it hardly seemed possible that he could so far have mistaken the actual

facts of the case. Surely that old man *was* in disguise, and back of that disguise of wig and beard?

"The boss, for my last ducat!" Bob Breeze muttered, leaping the word emphasis by thumping palm with fist. "If not; where'd he get that horseshoe on his hoof?"

Time and again that peculiarly shaped scratch had occurred to the man on trial before the masks, and during his conveying the captives to the cavern, he had made sure a fancy had not led him astray; the mark was precisely the same, and he had first noticed it on the foot-covering of the road-agent chief.

"It's *him*, dead sure! But—who's the woman? Was *she* playing bugs on me at first, rigged out as a man? Or, is this last outfit a fraud, and those rosy lips encircled by a crop of shorn bristles? And if so, *why* so! Am I worth so much trouble as all this comes to?"

Truly, the man from Chicago had abundant food for thought, and nothing would have suited him better than permission to sit down with pipe and leisure to cipher it all out to his own satisfaction. But that was denied him, even though his movements apparently were free and untrammelled as mortal could wish.

He gave a trip and a stumble over a convenient bit of rock, pausing to nurse his ankle and hop about with pain-contorted features for a few seconds. Under cover of this performance, which defied detection by even the most suspicious, Bob Breezes tried to solve one doubt; but do his best he could not catch sight or sound of any guards.

"Maybe they're not watching me," he reflected, as he once more pursued the course lined out for him. "Maybe they're risking my taking both feet in my hands for a private trip. *Maybe!* But—I'm obeying orders, and can do that much without being under guard, I reckon!"

That he persisted in "obeying orders" without making an attempt to get out of this unhealthy region now that the path seemed open to him, proved how sincere Robert was in his wish to become one of the band of law-breakers. Perils, past and prospective, could not change his course now that it had been fairly entered upon. All he asked for was fair play, and a show for his entrance money.

"It's bucking against mighty long odds, take it in the most favorable light," his thoughts ran as he drew nearer the spot where the two horses had been left to take their chances. "If I wasn't a rank fool, I'd pitch it all overboard and cut for a fresh deal! What can it profit a man's purse, if he keeps bucking until he gets it right in the neck? It's bad enough, surely, to have Judge Lynch dangling a snug noose before one's eyes, without feeling that one's pals are laying death-traps on every side for one's feet! And yet—"

There it was! *And yet!* Do his level best, Bob Breeze could not refrain from speculating over the past, as well as taking thought for the future.

He was morally certain that the chief of the road agents had taken this method of testing his reliability; that he had donned a disguise so perfect in every respect as to be detection-proof, only for that insignificant-looking scratch on the side of his boot. But—*why* did he think it worth while to take such extraordinary pains?

"If he doubted me—and that he surely *did*—why not end all by a slug through my cabeza! Did he hope to fetch that about, without running any risk of an after-clap?"

That seemed the most reasonable solution; from the second his roving eyes took note of that tell-tale scratch, Bob Breeze had felt as much; that the disguised outlaw was biding his time for a death-shot.

"If I'd 'a' let fall a hint of that sort, how quick he would have started the music!" half-bitterly. "Then—only a road-agent sent across the divide, and another hero meekly bowing his head for the wreath of laurel! Only that, yet here I am, hot as ever to win favor in the Grand Mogul's eyes!"

Bob Breeze found the horses standing just as he had left them, and as he paused for a bit to listen, not a sound came from the road, either up or down. Nor was there any sign to be detected of watching eyes or guarding hands.

The man from Chicago gave a low, short chuckle as he cast a leisurely glance around over that rocky waste, his hands soothing the uneasy animals the while.

"Two good nags, and an open trail clear to Eureka! What better pudding could a detective ask for? A dash for help, a rush back this way, a surround and a thorough clean-up! Well, it rattles off like a mice, only—things aren't always just what they seem on the surface!"

Bob Breeze took his time about unknotting the bridle-reins, and while so occupied, he managed to give the saddles a pretty thorough examination, yet without acting so as to invite suspicion on the part of those who might even then be noting down in their minds his every action.

"Good nags; well worth the lifting, if a body was in that line of business! And a

sure-enough side-saddle, too! Then—who *was* she?"

This was bringing thought around into the same old rut, and with a frown at his brain's persistency, Breeze sprang into the saddle of the horse ridden formerly by the patriarch, leading its mate by the bridle-reins as he moved toward the cavern once more.

The new recruit seemed wholly at his ease, and as he rode forward, his pursed-up lips shaped a subdued tune, the well-timed notes betraying no slight knowledge of music. If guards there were hovering nigh, their senses must have been marvelously acute if they detected aught other than perfect composure and self-reliance in that manner.

"All set, and here we come again!" Bob breezily called aloud, as he drew near the hidden entrance.

A tall, hooded shape promptly made its appearance, and the voice of the chief came to his ears:

"You've done well, so far, Robert. 'Light, now. This lad will attend to the nags for the present."

"You're saying it, boss, and everything goes," cheerily cried the novice, alighting and resigning the reins to the outlaw who came forward at those words. "Didn't make such a wretched botch of it, for the first attempt, did I sir?"

"You've done nobly—you've turned a trick that I'll never forget though I should live to see a hundred years!" almost enthusiastically cried the chief, his gloved hands shooting out to grip those of the new recruit. "If you only knew—"

"Well, boss, I'm not asking it, but—I never could bear to cut a pal short when his clapper took a notion for extra work," Breeze said with a dry, humorous chuckle.

"Which means that you'd like to hear just why I'm so worked up?"

"You said it, boss, not me."

"Still, that's what you meant?" persisted the outlaw.

"Only if you really need somebody to do the listening, sir."

Through the eyelets in the grain-sack, those dark orbs, now filled with a reddish luster, gazed intently into the face of the novice. Bob Breeze quietly bore that scrutiny, like one who has naught to conceal.

"I really begin to believe I can trust you, old fellow, so—come with me!" at length said the outlaw, turning toward the masked entrance, and passing into the dark tunnel.

Without a word Bob Breeze followed, one hand gently closing on a portion of his guide's clothing as the darkness grew more intense. He was led to the chamber in which he had been so severely put to the test, and where he saw several of the gray-hoods gathered. But instead of pausing here, the chief kept straight ahead, entering another dark passage which seemed to lead them fairly into the bowels of the mountain.

Presently he came to a halt near where a tin lamp was burning dimly, and abruptly spoke:

"Bob Breeze, I've tested you pretty thoroughly; more so, in fact, than you can have any idea of, since not a single step of yours this day but has been taken under the muzzle of guns and pistols."

"Well, boss, not having anything to hide on my part, I don't reckon I was running such a terrible risk. Still I'm glad it's over with."

"And I! But how glad? Words can't even begin to tell you, Breeze! Why, man, when I started you forth, I hadn't the ghost of an idea as to the value of the game I bade you fetch. If I had—and to think! I might have lost it all, and never known what I was missing!"

"Then it wasn't quite a water-haul, boss?"

"A water-haul?" echoed the chief, with a short laugh, so fierce, so full of undying hatred that its echoes caused a little shiver to wave up and down the new recruit's back. "Why, Breeze, if I'd only suspected *who* was on the trail, I'd have broken my neck trying to get at it the first! A water-haul? Man, dear! A nobler prize never was taken!"

"Then—I fetched in old friends, captain?" innocently asked the new recruit.

"Friends? An old enemy, rather! An enemy whose black heart I'll tear—"

He abruptly checked himself, one hand flying up to his masked lips as though to close them by main force. Breeze did not venture to say aught, just then, and, quickly rallying, the chief spoke again:

"Never mind. I can't talk of it yet, even to the man who has brought me what I've coveted for years past. Now—you *really* wish to serve me, as one of the family?"

"If you reckon you can trust me, sir," bowed Breeze, gravely.

"I'll answer that, by proving my faith, old man," with a cheery slap on one shoulder, then quickly adding: "I've got to leave here for a time, and my game—the game you fetched in, Robert—is stowed away, back yonder: the only really safe spot in the den. Will you stand guard here, until I come back?"

"If you wish it, captain."

"I do wish it. Don't let any one pass, either way. Keep the boys from going in. And—above all!—keep the game from going out!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BOB BREEZE WINS A HUG.

WITHOUT another word by way of explanation, and without pausing long enough for even glib-tongued Robert to ask more explicit instructions, the captain turned and glided noiselessly away in the gloom, heading for the outer chamber.

"Well!" ejaculated the new recruit, settling back in a comfortable position on his heels, with his back supported against the cool rocks, "I'm in for it now! In for what? That's just what I'd give my first week's wages to know, for sure!"

Was it possible that he could have drawn a wrong deduction from that peculiarly-shaped scratch? Could he have made a mistake in taking that graybeard for the chief in disguise?

It hardly seemed possible, and yet—if not, then what fresh test of his fidelity was about to be made?

"Dollars to cents, it's another trap!" was his mental decision, as he drew forth his pistols and made sure they were in working order. "Well, this is considerably more bother than I bargained for when I jumped at Johnny's offer. Wish he might make a try to run the guard! If I didn't make him think there is a hereafter, then I've never been fairly introduced to Breezy Bob—that's all!"

It was anything but a cheery location. The air, though dry, was so cool as to be chilly. The oil-lamp gave forth an evil smell, and its rays only served to make the darkness more perceptible. Then, too, the uncertainty as to what test of nerve or of fidelity was before him, was peculiarly trying.

For many long minutes Bob Breeze racked his brain, trying to guess in what shape that trial was to come, but in vain. So many strange things had happened since his first encounter in the stage-road, that it was no easy matter to produce order out of chaos.

"Well, I'm placed here by the boss. He bids me guard against certain possibilities. I'll do my duty, let what may come, and then I'll have a chance to swear the blame off on other heads than mine!"

It was perhaps the most sensible conclusion he could have arrived at, and with a firm determination to wholly deserve the trust which had been placed in him, Bob Breeze settled back, on guard.

Doubtless his surroundings had something to do with lengthening the minutes, but, to him, it seemed as though hours had crept along before even a sound came to break the tediousness of that vigil. But at length a sound did come to his ears, and one which caused his bowed figure to draw rigidly erect, his breath stilling as he hearkened for more.

It was not long delayed; an odd sound, too, when it came; a sob or a gasp, as of some suffering being hidden away yonder in the gloom!

"A woman, or I'm a liar!" was his first thought, his fierce grip on his revolver-butt slightly relaxing as he listened for more. "Wonder if—Steady, you!"

Clear and sharp his challenge run forth, yet pitched too low for alarming those who might be stationed in the outer chamber.

"Pity! mercy! If you are human, have pity!"

What little doubt Bob Breeze entertained was banished by those faint, tremulous tones, so full of despair, yet tinged with a feeble ray of hope. It was a woman who spoke, and a woman's figure which came so timidly beneath the rays of the lamp beyond.

She cast a glance upward, and by that uncertain light, Breeze fancied he could recognize the face of the woman whom he had escorted to the cavern from the stage trail a few hours earlier.

Now, as then, it was but an uncertain view. Where had been the foiling veil, now was that smoky light, but he felt fairly confident that his guess had hit the truth, and that this was really a woman, not a youth in disguise.

"Sorry to say it, ma'am, but I reckon you've struck no thoroughfare this time," he said, still in those clear, yet guarded tones.

"Oh, sir, you are—is it not the gentleman who brought us here?" tremulously asked the woman, moving forward, paying no heed to the significant click as his pistol was cocked.

"Reckon I'll have to plead guilty, ma'am, but, all the same, you're wandering out of your latitude, just now. Will you kindly turn back, before you run afoul of a snag?"

"You are not—that demon is not here?"

"Just me, ma'am, but I'm of a bigness to fill this neck o' woods chuck-jam full, you want to see! And so—since you can't go further, don't you reckon you'd best 'bout ship and sail back to the harbor you've just stolen out of? I would—really, I would, ma'am!"

The new recruit spoke earnestly, and he meant each word that passed his lips, just then. A man he was fully prepared to meet and baffle, but—well, a woman was different!

Proof of this was given him, right then and there, for, in place of making the best of a bad matter, and turning back to await a more favorable opportunity, she came nearer, her clasped hands held out appealingly, her voice broken by

sobs which seemed to come straight from her fear-wrung heart.

"If you only knew! Oh, sir, you are a man: you are not utterly heartless like that demon of evil who—you must have pity! Only for you, this terrible misfortune could never have overwhelmed us! Only for you—pity, by your mother's soul, I beg!"

In spite of the fact that he rather more than suspected a cunning trap was being set for him, Bob Breeze was affected in a degree by that piteous tone and those appealing gestures. But he dared not yield, even in seeming, for how could he tell but that the captain and all his gang were even then watching and listening?

"Who are you ma'am?" he forced himself to ask, almost harshly.

"A poor, weak, wretched girl, whose only hope lies in finding a man among so many pitiless demons!" came the more even response, as the woman drew yet a little nearer the guard.

"Reckon I'll call the boss, then, and let him—"

"Stop!" cried the woman, springing still closer, one hand lifted in an almost fierce gesture as she swiftly added: "Call him not—that merciless demon! By your mother's soul, man, I adjure you—call him not! Rather murder me where I stand—see!"

With a tragic gesture in perfect keeping with her words, the woman offered her breast to the death-blow she invoked. And, dim though the light was, Bob Breeze gazed upon her with almost admiration.

The lamp was secured to a point of rock back of where they now stood, its yellow rays only serving to give a lighter background for her figure. That, perfect in contour, though partially disguised by the wide scarf which she had draped about her head and shoulders, seemed a picture, perfect as it was rare in such surroundings.

Bob Breeze could make out little of her face. A corner of the scarf fell over her brows, and shaded the remainder of her face, thus perfecting the disguise begun by the faint light.

Yet he could make out quite enough to satisfy him that this was indeed the being whom he had escorted to the cavern, after the capture in the stage road.

"Well, you can't scarcely call it see, ma'am," he hesitated. "That lamp yonder 'pears about striking work, but if you'll just fall back a bit or two, so's I can punch up yen' fire a mite, why, I'll take another look—just for luck!"

The woman shrunk back with a low ejaculation as of renewed despair, and with a shivering gesture drew the scarf closer around her face and shoulders.

In that chilly atmosphere this action looked natural enough, but Bob Breeze, suspicious as ever, felt assured that a wish for disguise rather than the desire for warmth induced that action.

Yet one unprejudiced could hardly have found fault with her acting, if acting it was. Her every word, every movement, every gesture portrayed intense agitation, desperate fear, with a faint tinge of hope. It was like one who feels that success means life, failure death, or worse.

"Are you a man, born of woman?" she asked vainly striving to make her voice steady, but then breaking down, just when she ought to have been most courageous. "Oh, sir, I beg of you, have pity! Save us—save him, my poor, old father! Save him from death by torture at the hands of that merciless demon who—Have mercy, I pray you! See!" as she sunk to the rough flooring of stone. "I beg it—on my knees I beg it!"

Bob Breeze made no immediate reply. He recoiled a bit, catching his breath audibly, like one who is fighting against inclination in favor of stern duty.

She caught that sound, and fresh hope echoed in her strained tones as she pleaded afresh. Her words came so rapidly, so indistinctly, that even his keen ears could not catch them all. It was a prayer for pity, since to him alone could she appeal in that hour of agony.

"If I only could, ma'am," he hesitatingly muttered, when the woman ceased speaking, through lack of breath. But—there's the boss!"

"A demon, worse than Prince Lucifer himself!" was her passionate interjection. "If you only knew him as he has shown himself to us! If you could only know—but time presses! You will have pity? You will aid us to escape from that devil's grip? Say you will, sir, if there is even a spark of humanity left in your composition! If you are a man—"

"Well, ma'am, you see it's something like this," interposed Breeze, rallying himself once more. "I'm a man on holidays, but all the rest of the time I am nothing but a machine, and the captain is my engineer. Even if I knew how to run myself, I wouldn't dare try it on. See?"

With an impulsive gesture the woman tore a heavy, fat notebook from a hidden pocket, opening it sufficiently to afford a glimpse of what doubtless were bank-bills, at the same time saying:

"See! I do not come as a beggar, sir! I am rich—we are not without means to pay even you your price. Save us—guide us safely out of this den of demons, and you shall be rich! Ay! we'll give you money enough to satiate even your avarice!"

"How much did you say, ma'am?" hesitated

Breeze, eying the pocketbook covetously, a sigh following his question.

"More than even a Shylock could demand!" came the swift reply. "If you will save us, name your own price, and we'll double it, freely!"

"But—I say, ma'am," hesitated Breeze, rubbing his nose with thumb and forefinger of his unarmed hand. "How come it the boss didn't make a surer clean-up of it? That's biting me—hard!"

"Because he was so overcome with devilish joy at finding us in his power. Because he—Take it, sir!" trying to thrust the money into his hands, despite his evident reluctance. "Save my poor father, and I'll do anything! I'll worship you as a god! I'll—"

"If I only could, without breaking orders, ma'am. But, you see, the boss set me here on particular duty, and—well, I'll have to turn you back, and that's the whole of it, ma'am."

"Turn me back? To see my old father brutally tormented to death? To have an even worse fate befall poor me? Oh, sir, save us, and I'll worship you! I'll be your willing slave for the rest of my life! I'll do anything—say you will!"

As she sobbingly asked that question, she flung herself upon his breast, twining both arms about his neck in an almost fierce hug, her warm lips touching his until—

"I say, boss!" shouted Bob Breeze, clasping the captive firmly, and holding her powerless despite her vigorous efforts to break away as his voice rolled through that dark passage. "Boss! Captain! Help, if you don't want to lose the whole strawberry patch!"

The alarm almost instantly followed that shrill outcry, and as loud voices and hurrying feet came that way, other lights flashed red rays along the dark tunnel. And then, as the stern voice of the chief came demanding what the row was about, the woman twisted free from the new recruit's arms, and flinging the scarf over head and face, beat a rapid retreat in the direction she had come from a little earlier.

"Good heavens, boss!" gasped Bob Breeze, leaning against the rock-wall like one sorely feeling the need of support. "Must I stand much more o' this sort of truck?"

"What happened here?" sternly demanded the chief, pistol in hand. "Who was it run back yonder, just now?"

"A woman, who tried to bribe me to set her free. And, I say, boss?"

"Well, out with it, confound you, fellow!"

"They say every man has his price, and when she kissed me—yum, yum!—I had to holler for help! I just had to, boss!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE NEW RECRUIT'S REWARD.

FROM the gloom which lay beyond the oil lamp there came the clear, well-remembered voice of the lieutenant, crying out:

"I have her fast, captain!"

"Who is it?"

"The lady Breeze fetched to camp, no less!"

"All right. Take her back to where she came from, and make sure she doesn't turn out for another tramp, for one little while."

There came the sounds as of a brief struggle, then a sharp cry as of indignant pain, followed by the words:

"Hands off, you villain! I'll yield—I'll go back—anything rather than submit to your vile touch!"

"All right, my lady!" came the light, mocking tones of the lieutenant, an instant later. "I've got a pussy-cat of my own, without inviting other claws. Now, follow your nose, and we'll—"

The sound of voices died away, and for a brief space there was silence almost complete.

Leaning against the rock-wall as though nearly overcome by the struggle he had just passed through, Bob Breeze was using both eyes and ears, his wits never more active than just now. He saw that one or two of the gray-hoods had passed on under the light to which allusion has so frequently been made, and likewise took note of the fact that the majority had fallen back in the direction of the first rock-chamber, either of their own accord, or in obedience to some signal from their chief which had escaped his notice.

The outlaw leader seemed strongly excited by what had occurred, and even the new recruit, breezy though he had shown himself, did not think it wise to venture too far, just then.

The captain took a pace or two toward the spot from whence those voices had come, only to check himself. He turned toward Bob Breeze, his hand trembling perceptibly as it touched an arm.

"Come with me, man. There's more in this affair than I can grasp at once, and—why did you cry out for help?"

"Because I needed it right then and there, boss," with a half-sheepish laugh. "Because I didn't know but that—I say, captain, did you ever have a strange lady try to smother you with kisses, while her arms were putting the double cinch about your neck?"

"I don't—what are you trying to get through you, Breeze?"

"That was *my* fix, sir! Just *that*! And I *had* to yell, or knuckle, boss! Just *had* to!"

Bob Breeze accompanied his confession with a sigh which apparently came from the very depths of his boots. To one less strongly worked up than was the outlaw leader, this sigh might have aroused ugly suspicions, and brought forth an accusation of waning fidelity; but in grim silence he led Bob Breeze back to the rock-chamber in which the new recruit had been put to the first test.

Several of the gray-hoods had their heads together as though talking over the recent alarm, but they scattered quickly at the coming of their chief, though he paid no attention to them whatever.

When fairly within the room, and choosing a point where the light of a lamp would strike the new recruit fairly in the face, the chief turned toward Bob Breeze, speaking with greater composure than he had betrayed since that alarm was given.

"Now—out with it all, Breeze! Just how did it come about?"

Although he had not quite decided how much was farce, and how much the shadow of coming tragedy, Robert had reached one conclusion, and that was to tell the unbiased truth. That could not make matters any worse for the captives if the woman's attempt was genuine, and if it should prove to be, as he rather more than suspected, merely another cunning trick to test his fidelity, any attempt at evasion or exaggeration would be sure to react on his own head.

"Well, captain, 'twas something like this," he began, stroking his nose as a man often will when striving to be more than ordinarily accurate in all details.

He told how that curious sound had given him the first inkling of something beyond the ordinary, then followed it up with a graphic account of how the woman tempted him to dishonor his trust.

"And she offered you money, Breeze?"

"She did, sir, for a scandalous fact!"

"And you refused to take it? *You*—formerly one of Pinkerton's Pets! Steady, old man!"

"Does sound kind o' tough, don't it, boss?" with a faint grin on his face, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, then hastily adding: "Of course I couldn't take it—that way, your honor! But—well, see for yourself how hard she tried to hit me, captain!"

As he spoke, Bob Breeze produced the fat note-book, and held it forth to his superior. The chief seemed puzzled for a little, but as the new recruit started to open the book, he caught it from his hand, tearing away the strap that held it closed, exposing bank bills, some of them showing high figures.

"And you refused this, Breeze? Unsight unseen, of course it was?"

"Not quite, your honor. She opened the weasel and rifled the long-green a bit: plenty enough to show me what a wad she was trying to cram me with. But—well, *you* know how it worked, boss!"

Bob Breeze closed with a little sigh as his gaze followed that receptacle of so much wealth, but if he anticipated a momentary reward, just then, he was fated to be disappointed.

Possibly the chief never thought of such a thing. Or, if thinking of it, saw no occasion for offering a portion where the entirety had been refused.

Securing the strap once more, he thrust the book into his bosom, speaking quickly:

"I was an idiot for not making a search, but—old man, your hand! I'd hate to risk even the oldest pal among my family with such a temptation as this! And *you*—you threw it over your shoulder!"

"Just threw it clean over, boss!" assented Robert, stifling a sigh in its birth, and forcing a chuckle as he returned that hearty grip.

"Why wouldn't I, sir? You put me on guard, and bade me permit none to pass without kicking up an alarm. And so— I say, boss?"

"Say it, man, dear!"

"This woman—you're not dead stuck on her, I don't reckon?"

"Well, hardly!" with a short bitter laugh.

"Then, if you haven't any better use for her, what's the matter with my taking her off your hands, captain?"

"Take her off—what do you mean?"

"Well, she talked so sweet, you know, boss, and when—'twas more like chewing fresh gum than I can think of anything else! And so—don't you reckon I'm about old enough to get married, captain?"

The chief stood staring at the new recruit as though unable to even guess why he should betray so much embarrassment, but as that query found birth at last, his right hand made a fierce gesture, and he sternly spoke:

"No more of that, Robert Breeze! *She* may marry, but her bridegroom shall be grim death!"

"That lets *me* out, then!" muttered Breeze, brushing a sleeve across his damp brows.

If the outlaw heard, he did not heed. His voice, though low, was full of savage purpose, and if the captives could have caught his words just then, right well might they have accused him of demonism.

"I never knew that they were in this part of

the world, until you brought us face to face, Bob Breeze. If I had—but you spoke of marrying her, I believe! Drop all such thoughts, old man! I'd kill you by inches before you should serve either of those persons! I'd toast my twin brother over a slow fire if he was to try to rob me of the vengeance I swore should be mine when—"

His fierce speech came to an abrupt ending, for the sound of light, swift footsteps came to their ears, and a hand dropped to a pistol before the figure and voice of his second in command was recognized.

"It's just me, captain. Hope I don't intrude?"

"You've left them—how?"

"Together, weeping and moaning in each other's arms. Good as a play to hear them take on, captain!" came the laughing reply.

"Good! it's the first taste of vengeance! Let them mourn, for I've nearly made up my mind as to how their punishment shall begin."

He turned abruptly back to the new recruit, gripping a shoulder as he harshly demanded:

"You say you are ready to serve me, Bob Breeze?"

"That's what I've been trying to do, your honor."

"And right nobly have you succeeded, too! Only for you, I might never have known how near to hand my long-baffled vengeance was! Only for you—but words can't even begin to do it full justice!"

"So the lady 'peared to think, your honor," dryly said the man from Chicago. "Only *she* seemed to think I came nigher meriting cusses than thanks—wuss luck me!"

The lieutenant laughed softly, one gloved hand patting the new recruit on a shoulder as he said:

"Was it such ill luck, then, Robert? You had the lady locked in your arms, and if that had been *my* case—well, I'd be claiming sweet toll to this very minute!"

"I didn't have a chance to claim; it just covered my trap like a mustard plaster, and—oh, g'way, honey! Don't talk! I feel like melting and running down in my boots, just to think!"

The chief listened without interrupting, but as the new recruit languidly fanned one ear with a hand, he spoke sharply enough:

"You've served me faithfully so far, Bob Breeze, but—if I bade you go slit wide open the throats of those two persons?"

With a barely perceptible hesitation, Robert made reply:

"If you ordered me to do that, as my chief, sir, I'd obey."

A harsh laugh came, then the words:

"And I'd murder you by inches for robbing me of that pleasure, man! Enough! You are one of the family, now, and shall find your reward in the share which will fall to your lot as such. It's a big game we're playing, where the stakes are in proportion with the risks we run. You will not shrink from bearing your share of the work, Breeze?"

"I'll do my level best, captain."

"That's better than boldly making oath to what you can only guess. All right. You'll hold yourself ready to obey the signal for work, when it comes, then do your duty as wholly as you have done it just now."

"And that signal is—just what, captain?"

"Never mind; it may be one thing, or it may come in another shape. You'll be made to understand, never fret, Robert. And now—get it afoot, lieutenant! The regular thing, of course!"

The second in command gave a peculiar whistle, which set the gray-hoods bustling, bringing others of the gang in from other quarters, all to range around the rude table which was planted near the center of the rock-chamber by some of the outlaws.

At one end of the table a rude stool was placed for the new recruit whose advent was about to be celebrated, and installing Bob Breeze in person, the captain gave the signal which led to each one present holding aloft their flasks.

"To our new brother, gentlemen! May he prove an ornament to our ranks, and a terror to our enemies! May he forget all harsh tests now that his initiation is complete, and may none of us ever look back with regret to this hour! Brothers, drink to our new recruit!"

Leading the ceremony himself, the captain tipped his silver-mounted flask to a level, then lowered it, with a low bow toward the worthy whom they were toasting.

"Brother Breeze, you see before you the elect of the Family. Only the tried and the proven few are ever admitted to our councils, as you will be prepared to admit when you come to know them more intimately. To that better acquaintance, we beg you to drink!"

As he spoke, he passed the flask to the new recruit, and with a low bow of recognition, Bob Breeze accepted it, saying, simply:

"To our better acquaintance, brothers, all!"

He lifted the flask to his lips, drinking freely. Why not, since he had just seen the chief do the same? And yet—with a hoarse, suffocating cry, he dropped the flask, clutching at his throat!

He tried to rise to his feet, but in vain. And then, his head drooping forward upon the table, he knew nothing more!

CHAPTER XVI.

A SANGUINARY WARNING.

It was many long hours before that strangely induced stupor came to a natural ending, and Bob Breeze, with a gasping sigh, gave a slight stir on his stool.

A single lamp was burning on the rude table which had supported his bowed head and shoulders through all that length of time. Its vile odors lay heavy upon the still air, and its yellow rays did but little to banish the darkness which reigned within the cavern.

Another sigh, another uneasy movement, this time ending in a collapse as the stool tipped on the uneven floor, sending its occupant in a limp heap to the stones.

The shock brought forth a faint exclamation of pain, but it was just the stimulant most needed by Robert Breeze, just then. It set his stagnant blood to flowing more freely, and after a few moments, he lifted his head, staring vacantly around, mumbling:

"On deck, boss!"

The sound of his own voice gave him another start; the notes seemed wholly unfamiliar, and with an instinctive clutch for a weapon, the new recruit lifted himself on his elbow, staring about in quest of him who uttered those words.

"What—how—where—"

For several minutes all was a confused blank, but then, little by little the strange truth began to float back to his brain, and almost his first actual thought was to lock his lips tightly, lest he let fall dangerous words while only partially master of his tongue.

He dragged himself to a sitting posture, his right hand gripping the butt of a revolver as soon as he could realize that he had not been deprived of his weapons. He stared about him, looking for his enemies; he could no longer doubt on that point: only enemies would have abused him so shamefully!

And yet—just what had they done?

Not poisoned him, as he had believed in that horrible moment after drinking from the silver-mounted flask which the chief had placed in his hands. He was still alive, still able to move, to reason, to—

He failed to catch sight of a living being, nor did the faintest sound come to his ears by which he might know human beings were nigh. All was still as the gravel! And—there was a scent as of death in the air he was inhaling!

Right or wrong, so he believed, and that horrible fancy lent Robert Breeze power to stagger to his feet, supporting himself in those first dizzy moments by leaning heavily upon the table.

Almost unwittingly his heavy eyes settled upon a lighter patch that marked the dingy table-top. Little by little this grew clearer, until, with a half-smothered ejaculation, he stared at a sheet of paper, covered with writing in a bold, plain hand.

"Orders from the boss, I reckon," he forced himself to utter, aloud, still vaguely believing that he must be under watch and ward. "Ready for me, when I woke up—from my snooze, eh?"

It was a pitiful effort at dissimulation, but just then the man from Chicago was capable of nothing more elaborate, and even that attempt did his nerve no little credit.

By this time his sight was improving, and as he lowered his eyes once more to that marked paper, he recognized his own name, in large letters, heading the written lines. His free hand rose to brush over his eyes, for it seemed as though they were playing him false in one respect: but not those red characters remained the same.

"Is it meant for me to read, master?" Bob Breeze forced himself to ask, sweeping his gaze around, meeting only that heavy gloom beyond the limited range of the smoky lamp.

His voice came back in dull, unnatural echoes, so characteristic of these underground openings, but no other reply was vouchsafed him.

Even yet he could not drive away that strange sense of unfriendly eyes suspiciously watching his slightest movement, and once more he spoke, this time louder, more distinctly:

"If you don't refuse, captain, I'll read what is written here!"

Still no answer, save those dull echoes, and giving the lamp a little shake to moisten the wick better, Bob Breeze bent forward to read what words had been written on the sheet of paper.

At the top was his name, printed in Roman characters, and—he gave an involuntary shiver at the gruesome fancy—in *blood*! After the name came the words:

"You have passed the last test, and are now a full-fledged member of our family. You have taken the oath, and, though you may not know as much when these words first meet your eye, *you are sealed to us with human blood*!"

"Be wise, and beware! Forget all that has happened here. Better eat your tongue than let it ever betray aught to outsiders! The past is dead; see that you are not sent to keep it company!"

"Go to Eureka, as you intended. Act just as though nothing had occurred to delay your arrival. Keep your own counsel, and keep your ears on the alert for the signal! It will come, sooner or later. If it finds you unprepared, you will have all eternity in which to deplore your mistake. When it comes, obey without question, and great shall be your reward!"

"Carry yourself wisely, else ill may find you first. Though you may know it not, every step you take will be watched, your every action reported to me, your master. This applies not only to you, but to all of the family. Honor among rogues is played out; precaution is much better!"

"Burn this as soon as read, to avoid accidents. If you should forget to do this, look out for an accident to befall you!"

Twice over Bob Breeze read these lines, trying to fix each peculiarity in his brain, but feeling that he was succeeding poorly. He had not fully recovered from that drugged draught, and it was with difficulty that he could fix his brain on any one point for more than a few seconds at a time.

That emphasized warning was not lost upon him, however. It seemed to match well with the strange feeling of being watched, which had been with him from his first conscious movement. And so, after the second reading, he held the blood-marked paper to the flame of the lamp, holding it by a corner until the fire licked his fingers, and the remnant turned to ashes before it could float down as far as the table.

"I hear, and I obey, captain," he spoke, clearly, to that real or fanciful guardian. "Now—have you any further orders? If not, I may go?"

Still no answer, and after a brief hesitation, Robert Breeze moved away from the table, heading for the front entrance, as nearly as he could judge in his present state.

Finding the tunnel, he pressed through it, giving a little gasp as the pure air came to his lungs. It was like a powerful tonic, after having for so long inhaled that heavy, oil-laden atmosphere.

After the first glad breath, Bob Breeze stared about him in surprise. It was night, and the position of the stars told him it could not be far from twelve o'clock. Yet, surely he had lain drugged for a much longer period than that would indicate?

"Yet, it can't be that I've been unconscious through an entire day?" he mused, even while searching the space adjacent for some of the gang.

That seemed absurd, even to think of, yet it was hardly less difficult to believe that no longer space of time had crept along. It had been high noon when Johnny Dogood played his hold-up act. Much time had been consumed in the inquisition, to say nothing of all the rest that had taken place.

"Why, seems like I was standing guard an age! Then, my stomach takes oath I've missed a full dozen solid meals!"

The pure air was clearing his befogged wits, and with them returned his customary cool nerve. He felt in no such haste to abandon the spot where he had undergone so many trials, and having satisfied himself that no person was hidden in the approach to the cavern, Bob Breeze deliberately retraced his steps to the rock-chamber where he had burnt that sanguinary warning.

All was as he had left it, and picking up the lamp he began a systematic inspection of his surroundings. Although he no longer felt so positive that a spy had remained to take note of his proceedings, he was resolved to act in such a manner that no actual harm could be reported against him to the captain of the gang of outlaws.

There was no one hidden in the first chamber, and but little else to interest the searcher, unless it might be a few bits of bread and cold fried bacon which he found in one corner. Placing these upon the table, he spoke aloud, as before, for the benefit of a possible spy:

"Grub, what there is of it! Now, if I can only find some water, or other drink, I'll be fixed for the rest of the night, sure!"

Holding the lamp so as to cast its best rays in front, Breeze entered the second passage, where he had been stationed by the chief as guard against the escape of his captives. He passed that point without making any discoveries. The tin lamp still stood on the rocky projection, though its flame had been extinguished.

Shortly after, he came to a second enlargement, clearly the work of nature's hands, and here, near the center of the opening, his light fell upon two large patches of dark substance, contrasting strongly with the gray stone floor.

Despite his nerve, a shiver crept over him as he bent lower, casting the rays from his lamp squarely upon the nearest patch: it shone with a dull reddish luster, and as he touched it with the tip of a finger, the film broke, to show the watery portion beneath: it was blood!

Beyond a doubt this was the place in which the two captives had been confined, provided, always, that they were really what they claimed to be, and not a cunningly arranged cheat. If

so, had they been sacrificed to the fierce vengeance sworn by the outlaw chief?

Without attempting to squarely answer those ugly questions just then, Bob Breeze resumed his investigations. He found that two other tunnels branched away from that second cell, and he followed one of them until it ended in a small, gruesome den, with uneven roof and rough flooring: looking as though a heavy blast had been exploded there, then abandoned without any effort to clear away the debris.

Returning to the second chamber, he paused for a few moments in front of the other passage, but finally decided not to explore it. The hour was growing late, and he was very hungry. If murder had really been done, the victims were clearly past his helping. Even if a more careful search might reveal their bodies, to what good end?

"Not any more in mine!" was his decision, and retracing his steps, he secured the fragment of food, then extinguished the light, groping his way to the outer air.

The clear moonlight lent him aid sufficient to find a fairly snug resting-place, not many rods from the cavern, and from whence he could easily take note of anything going on in that quarter, should the gang see fit to return that night.

Eating his food slowly, to make it seem more like a "square meal," Bob Breeze gave himself up to busy reflection.

In his own mind it was no longer necessary for him to play a part foreign to his real character, and by jotting down a few of his unspoken sentences, much of that which remains to record will be better comprehended by the general reader.

"Tough nuts to crack—mighty tough, judging from the sample I've had thrust betwixt my teeth! And—is it really worth while? Is he, or any of his whelps, my game? And if he is Murray Nash, where will I strike his trail again?"

He acted as though he knew me, by name, at least. If so, and he is my man, will he stay around here? Would he have let me slip through his fingers alive? He had every chance in the world for putting me to sleep; why didn't he do it? Wouldn't he, if he was really Murray Nash, and thought I was looking after him, on the Kansas City score?"

That was the main point which bothered the detective, and for the better part of an hour he strove his hardest to throw light upon it. Only to abandon the attempt, for the present, stretching his limbs with a sleepy yawn as he curled himself up in a comfortable position.

"Go to the devil, all of you! I'm going to sleep! Good-night, all!"

Bob Breeze was as good as his word, and in less than ten minutes more he was soundly slumbering, without thought of the future.

CHAPTER XVII.

JOHNNY DOGOOD FEELS BETTER.

JOHN DOGOOD had just disposed of a goodly dinner, and, according to all rules and regulations made and provided, ought to have been feeling supremely content with himself and the world, if not with the devil. But all rules have their exceptions, and on this bright day, the one succeeding that on which Johnny had tried his hand at road-agenting, Dogood was feeling wretchedly blue and down in the mouth.

Feeling in no humor for idle chatter or lazy lounging about his favorite saloons, Johnny was aimlessly moving about, almost unconsciously drawing near to the eastern extremity of Eureka City, when he was met by a surprise which promised to entirely change his mental atmosphere, if its influence reached no further.

"Hello, cully!" rung forth a voice which caused the shambling fellow to start and shrink, even as he fell to staring, open-mouthed.

Yonder stood Bob Breeze, "big as life, and twice as natural!" Bob Breeze, the former partner and friend, over whose unknown fate he had been worrying so greatly!

"The devil!" Johnny Dogood managed to ejaculate, a moment later.

"No, no, cully; you do me entirely too much honor. Just one of his imps, and—What's the matter with you, Johnny? Look as if you'd rather skip than shake!"

While speaking thus, the man from Chicago was advancing, his right hand going out in friendly fashion, a half-mocking smile on his face as he took note of that shrinking, doubting manner.

"I didn't—I don't—"

Bob Breeze caught his reluctant hand, giving it the secret grips after a decidedly vigorous fashion. Either that, or else the very much alive fashion after which Breezy Bob clapped his shoulder, lent him a bit of much needed courage, for Dogood forced a smile in sickly fashion, and managed to utter a more connected greeting.

"I'm glad to see you, sir, mighty glad! I did reckon—that is, I didn't know but what you'd turned back, and—you see?"

"To cross the divide, eh?" chuckled Breeze, lightly, as though his first object was to set this former friend on a footing of complete ease. "Don't you think it, Johnny! When I strike a good thing, I freeze to it so mighty fast that

even grim death can't shake off my grip. And now—I'm not too late to join in the dance, eh?"

"Easy, man!" muttered Dogood, casting a swift, shy glance over a shoulder, his bronzed face turning several shades paler. "Not too loud, if you know what's good for the system!"

As a man frequently will, without knowing just what or just why, Breezy Bob imitated that glance around, but could see nothing to awaken suspicion of danger.

They were not far from the edge of the town, and while moving figures were visible here and there, none of them were nigh enough to give any uneasiness on the score of eavesdropping.

"Oh, what's the matter with you, Johnny? Man with the poker? Snakes? Blue monkeys, with pink eyes, and tails done up in curl-papers? Why, man, a body'd think you'd just broken out of jail, or hospital, to look!"

Dogood mumbled something about feeling "pretty rocky," which his Chicago pard received with a light laugh, at the same time locking arms and gently urging the other along in a course which would, if maintained, carry them clear of the town in a brief space of time.

"What license have you to feel rocky, Johnny?" he asked, half-contemptuously. "If 'twas me, now, there'd be some sense in it! You had a square meal for supper, I reckon? You bunked in, as usual, on something a bit softer than a stone floor? You didn't have to rouse yourself at cock-crow, and turn out to rustle for chuck where chuck there was none? You knew right where to hit a bottle of poison, and—oh, come off! What right have you to complain of feeling rocky?"

To tell the simple truth, John Dogood was beginning to feel a little better, and his spirits took yet another rise at this lively reproof. He could see nothing of the fierce resentment which he naturally looked for in that face, and with that relief came lightness of spirits.

"'Twas a pretty tough deal, wasn't it, Breeze?" he ventured, though none too eager to open that dangerous subject. "I tried all I knew how to smooth it over, but—well, you know!"

"If I don't know quite as much as I ought, I'm going to learn, or strain a lung trying to get there, Johnny," came the light response. "And, as a starter, suppose you answer my old put; I'm in time to shake a heel when the big dance is called?"

"If you mean—"

"Why wouldn't I? I mean that I've paid my footing, and now I'm in a holy hurry for the fun to break loose! When will it be? How will it come? And who's steering the whole shebang, anyway?"

His tones were no louder than usual, but so clear and clean-cut that they seemed dangerously pitched, at least to the rather nervous Dogood, and once more he entered his protest.

"Easy, Bobby! Not too loud! You want to know there's mighty long ears and heavy hands in this neck of woods, and if we were caught talking things over—I don't like to even think of the afterclap!"

"You want a nerve-tonic, first thing, Johnny!" retorted his old-time friend, with a touch of scorn in his lowered tones. "But, just as you say, and whispers go! Still, I've got to chin, and as you're the only sinner I'm acquainted with in this lovely burgh, you've got to do the listening and make the proper responses. See?"

"But, why talk of—of those matters, Breeze?"

"To reach a better understanding, of course. Any fool could answer an easy question like that, Johnny!" chuckled the man from Chicago, all the time edging further away from the likelihood of interruption on the part of any of the citizens.

By this time the two chums had drawn near the bridge which spanned the little river, and as they continued talking, this was crossed, placing the stream between themselves and the town.

"I wasn't called Breezy Bob for nothing, of course, pardner, so you ought to be able to make some allowance for me if I keep both our clappers from sticking tight with rust. And so, once more, I'm not too late for the circus, am I?"

"No, or you'd find Eureka stirred up from center to circumference. When the big eruption comes, be sure you'll not have to ask if the dance is on!"

"Good enough, so far! Now, just what sort of eruption is this going to be, Johnny?"

"Then you don't know? The boss didn't let on, last night, after I was sent away?"

"If he did, sleep's driven it out of my head. But that don't count, since you're to the fore, Johnny. So, once more, what's the programme?"

Dogood hesitated, changing color, casting uneasy glances around, in any direction save that occupied by the waiting sport from Chicago.

"I don't want to crowd you, pardner, but—I'm waiting! I'm in this racket to even, and I hold myself ready to obey orders, even if I have to shut my peepers and go in blindly; still, I'd a heap sight rather know just what to expect when the band begins to play."

"That's all right, of course, but, how can I tell you what I don't know my own self?"

"You don't know— Oh, lay down, rodent!"

Wasn't you howling about the wondrous eruption which was about to come off? Didn't you—"

"Well, haven't I got his word for it?" growled Dogood, sourly.

"Meaning the boss, of course?"

A nod of assent was given. Dogood looked as though he would cheerfully say good-by to his old friend for the time being, but before he could make a move to that effect, Breeze came again.

"Then you're going it blind, as well as myself, cully?"

"Going it blind, and that's just what's the matter, Breeze. If I could give you any light, I'd do it, gladly, of course; but— Well, you know what sort of warning the boss gave us all: to button up and saw wood until the right moment came for the eruption!"

"Who is the boss, Johnny?"

"Don't—curse it, man!" with a shiver perceptible in his lowered tones, and a glint of fear in his eyes as they flashed around them. "I tell you, Bob Breeze, it's mighty nigh sure death for us to begin talking about such matters, even when we feel sure we're all alone!"

"Would you rather I'd ask you such questions the first time we met up with each other in a crowd, Johnny?" dryly asked Breeze.

"Are you crazy, man?"

"Because, if you hadn't, Johnny, maybe you'd best talk back a bit while we're out here by our lonesome. For, mind you, I'm bound to gain knowledge either now or later, and so—who is the boss?"

"I wish I could tell you that, since you're so dead-set on knowing, pardner, but—I just can't do it!"

"Can't, or won't, Johnny?"

"Can't, I said, didn't I?"

"I believe so, and the likes of you never lies! Well, let that flea stick for the present, since you're so mightily afraid of the great mogul. You are afraid of him, Johnny?"

"You bet I am! Why wouldn't I be? So will you take a scare, when you come to know as much—that is—"

Dogood broke off, stammering, flushing hotly before that quizzical gaze. He felt that he had made an ugly slip, coming so close after his denial, but he failed to see just how he could mend matters, and so locked his lips, meaning to take refuge in grim silence thereafter.

A wise resolution, no doubt, but he was counting without his host. Bob Breeze had a certain point to gain, and when his mind was fixed on anything, he knew how to maintain his grip.

"Then you are afraid of the chief, Johnny? Good enough! That's one of the points I set out to make, and now—clean bosom, Johnny!"

"I've told you all I know—more than I know, for that matter."

"I'm not saying you lie, Johnny, for that would be impolite. Still, you talk just as I do when I'm trying to disguise the truth. You're afraid of the chief? Well, that being the case, you'd hardly fancy having him jump on your back as a traitor, would you?"

"No better than you would, Breeze. I must go, now, and—"

"Don't you be in such a rush, pardner. It's been a long day since you and I had a fair chance to chin-chin together, and now it's come my way, I'll hold my grip until the budget is turned wrong side out. So, once more, who is the boss, Johnny?"

"Go ask him, if you're so set on knowing, confound you, man!"

"I might do that, mightn't I? Never thought of it before! Still, he might be more greatly interested in other matters; say, for instance, that I was to denounce you to him as a traitor?"

"You'd be lying, and—"

"And you can't endure a falsifier, of course, Johnny. Well, you know how to keep me in the straight path, cully; just give me the knowledge I crave, and I'll stick to the truth until the cows come home. Refuse, and I'll run all Eureka through a skimmer but what I'll find the old man. And, when found, I'll just breathe in his ears a few words to this effect: 'Ware snakes, your honor! Johnny Nogood came to me and tempted me sorely! Yea, even tempted me to sell out the whole family, with your Worshipful Honor at the head, and swore that by so doing we could put big money in our purses?'"

"You wouldn't do that, man!"

"Don't you even begin to think I wouldn't, Johnny. Unless— Did I ask you to tell me just who and what the boss is, cully?"

"I don't know, I tell you. If I did, I'd tell you—honest, Bob!"

Watching him keenly, Bob Breeze felt disappointed. Either Dogood was telling the plain truth, or he was a far better actor than he had given him credit for being, as yet. Still he persisted:

"You don't know, but you have a pretty fair notion? Isn't that it, old fellow? You can't make oath, but you can— Now what's biting you, Johnny?"

Dogood had been casting uneasy glances around, one of which crossed the bridge, to alight on a tall, slender figure walking rapidly along, heading nearly due west. A considerable

distance separated them, but his eyes were keen, and that slight start betrayed him.

"Do you see yonder man—don't make a sign, confound you!" he muttered harshly, as Breeze wheeled in that direction. "If he takes notice—it's good-by us!"

"You mean— Who is he?"

"Well, he calls himself Hawley Sprague, and he runs a bank in town!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BREEZY LITTLE JOKE.

ROBERT BREEZE, the Rounder Detective, to give him one of the many titles which had been bestowed upon him by his associates, gazed keenly at that moving figure, asking no further questions until he lost sight of the banker, who appeared bound homeward.

Then he drew a long breath, covertly watching his present companion while muttering as if to himself:

"Tall, trim-built, quick-motioned; it might fit, I reckon. And that is the boss, Johnny?" abruptly putting that question to his mate.

"I'm not making oath to it, mind you," quickly muttered Dogood, uneasiness visible in his shifting movements, as well as in both face and voice. "I only say this much; if that isn't him, then I can't place the boss!"

"Hawley Sprague, you said? A banker? In what class? Faro?"

"No. Regular bank. I say, Breeze, drop it, can't you?"

"Presently, pard. Regular bank, eh? Sort of high-flyer, I reckon, from his tall hat and general rig-out? Lives in town, of course?"

Desperately enough Dogood answered each question. Knowing the reputation which the Chicago detective had won for persistency, he felt that the only way to get out of his present disagreeable fix was to frankly reveal all he knew.

That was not very much. He had never been taken fully into the confidence of his chief, nor did he believe that any of the other members were trusted any further.

"Unless it might be the lieutenant," he amended. "I reckon he knows the whole game, but cursed if I do!"

"Yet you trust him far enough to risk a rope about your neck?"

"Because I really believe there is big money waiting us. I've had a fistful or two, already, and—but why chin longer? You jumped at the same chance, and that without half the color I saw before I pitched my lot with the gang!"

"Maybe you didn't have such a rarely good sponsor as I was blessed with, Johnny," said Breeze, with a dry chuckle, as he once more locked arms with his mate, moving slowly away from the bridge, like one who feels in too good companionship to cut the interview short. "And that reminds me that I haven't fairly thanked you for the great favor you showed me, Dogood."

"You're not holding a grudge, Breeze?" asked his mate, dubiously, holding back a little the while.

"Holding a grudge for what, Johnny?" innocently asked the Rounder Detective. "Against you for giving me a chance to pick up a fortune at a single grasp? Why, man, dear, what do you take me for, anyway?"

That blunt, frank manner partially banished the doubts which Dogood had felt from the first moment of that encounter, and once more he moved onward without open reluctance.

"Well, I didn't know. They did give you a mighty tough deal, old man!" with a half-smothered laugh at the memory thus recalled.

"Well, yes, it did look a bit rusty, one time, but I suppose it is the customary thing with new recruits. You passed through the same ordeal, of course, Johnny, when you joined?"

"Well, not exactly!"

"So? Then I was made an exception to the general rule? Had I ought to regard that as an honor, or the contrary, cully?"

"Take your choice, Breeze. As for me, one time, I reckoned it ought to be regarded as a murder, no less!"

"When you snapped that empty shell at my pulsometer, Johnny?"

Dogood gave an assenting nod. His florid face grew a bit paler, and Breeze felt a shiver run through the arm which was locked in his.

"There's only one fault I have to find with it all, cully," quietly added the detective, casting a careless glance over a shoulder, to take note of their surroundings. "If you knew what sort of ordeal I would have to face, why didn't you let drop a hint beforehand? Surely that would have been no more than a friendly act."

"But, I didn't know what was coming, and when the boss ordered me to shoot—ugh!" with another shiver. "Don't talk of it, man!"

"You say you didn't know? Then, you expected my death to follow when you pulled trigger, Johnny?"

Dogood gave a start of uneasy surprise, for a sudden change had come into the voice of his companion. Softly modulated as ever, but with a peculiar sternness which was fairly matched by the steely glint in those gray-blue eyes. And

then, dropping the arm which he had held up to that moment, Bob Breeze sprung back a pace, his armed right hand rising to a level with the breast of the bewildered rascal opposite.

"Steady, John Dogood!" came his additional warning. "I don't care to down you for keeps, just now, but—put up your hands!"

"Oh, curse such a joke, man!" expostulated the other, as his hands involuntarily rose above his head.

"A rare old joke you're about to find it, too, Johnny!" retorted the detective, his lips curling in an ugly smile for the instant. "Now, you play your part just as truly as you did back in the den, yonder. In the first place, why did you try to butcher me, yesterday?"

"I didn't—how could I help it?" sulkily mumbled the fellow.

"Wait. You coaxed me into the scrape, of your own free will. You told me there would be no particular danger, and that in case any question arose, you'd stand good for my skin. Didn't you, Johnny?"

"I thought—I didn't—curse it, man! how could I help myself? He swore he'd blow my brains out if I didn't—and you got off, unhurt, didn't you?"

"No thanks to you if I did, Johnny. You did all that lay in your power to turn me into cold meat, instead of proving yourself a true pal by standing up for my honesty."

Dogood growled surlily. He had no defense ready, after his own admission. And even without that, his conduct at the den when his enforced attempt at murder proved a failure, would have condemned him.

"If I had stood in your shoes, and you had been placed in like peril through my doings, I'd have told the boss to do his dirty work with his own hand. If he had insisted, well, a man can die but once, and he had better die a man, than live a cur!"

"Don't, you'll not butcher me, pard?" whinily quavered Dogood.

"Did you show me any mercy when I stood before your gun, bound hand and foot, John Dogood? Did you hesitate to pull trigger at the word? Well, I have you covered, pretty much as you had me, then. Now—what reasons have you to offer why I shouldn't bust a cap?"

"Don't—I didn't—'twas all a joke!"

"Is that so?" with brows arching in mock surprise, then lowering as a short, dry chuckle came from his lips: "All right, my covey! So this is nothing worse than a joke, and if you don't find it a breezy old jest, then I'll change my name and call myself Nogood!"

Despite his airy manner, there was a scant show for hope to be seen in either face or actions. That grim muzzle kept covering his breast, no matter how John Dogood might twist and shift; he dared make no actual effort to escape, lest it provoke the death-shot.

Desperation lent him a faint show of courage, and he growled forth:

"How could I help myself, man? You saw—you heard him! It was the only show for saving my own life, and if I hadn't taken it, where would you have been any the better off? The boss would have killed you, just as quick!"

"The boss wasn't a friend whom I had trusted with my life, John Dogood. He looked on me as a spy, and so was entitled to act as he did. But you—that's where the thing galls, Johnny! You, who called me friend! You, who swore you'd see me safely in and out! You, who—bah! it brings the gail to my lips just to think it over!"

"If I'm hurt, Bob Breeze, you'll have to settle with all the rest of the gang. They'll never—"

"I'll settle with you first, Johnny, then answer for my deeds to the rest of the gang. Now—stir a finger before I give you full permission, and salt won't save your hide!"

Moving around to the back of his prisoner, Bob Breeze used his unarmed hand to pass around the fellow's body, unbuckling his belt and thus depriving him of all weapons. With unusual care for their safety, the detective moved backward until he could drop the belt behind a convenient boulder, out of casual sight, then he passed around until they stood face to face once more.

"I've drawn your teeth, John Osgood, and now I'll remove my own," he quietly spoke, lowering the hammer of his revolver and placing the weapon back into its scabbard at his hip.

"We'll call this a joke, even if I have to do the laughing for both sides."

He unbuckled his belt, backing away to deposit the arms behind another boulder, all the time holding himself in readiness to leap forward and close with his rival in case Dogood should attempt to break away. But no such emergency arose. Thoroughly puzzled, Johnny waited for what was to come next, afraid to risk worse by attempting flight.

"Shed your linen, Johnny!" cried the detective, with a return of his familiar breeziness of speech and manner as he stripped off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. "I'm going to paint a war-map all over both sides of your mug, just by way of a joke! Just a joke, old man!"

"But—I don't—confound it, Breeze!" began

Dogood, shrinking visibly as the muscular detective began dancing lightly in his front.

"Of course I can lick both you and your clothes, Johnny, but 'twould be a pity to muss up your Sunday-go-to-meetings, and I can't well claim a commission on the sale which might follow; don't you see? If I knew your clothier, 'twould be another matter! Now—must I punch you, so?"

Deftly his clinched fists touched the fellow on either cheek, just hard enough to lend a sting, and a fillop to his fighting blood; and with a grim chuckle the detective danced back out of reach of the return blows, saying airily:

"Oh, come out of your shell, Johnny Grub! Give me a show for my money, and that'll be little enough at the best. You can't fight. You couldn't lick a blind cripple who'd lost both arms. You couldn't—now, that begins to look more like business!"

Dogood, feeling that he was in for punishment anyway, desperately plucked up his courage, and tearing off his outer garments, he "put up his hands" after a fashion which betokened some slight knowledge of the manly art of self-defense.

"Hope you'll pan out clearer color than when you tried a gun, Johnny!" mocked his adversary, balancing himself on the balls of his feet, every muscle ready, yet never a fiber on the strain as yet, ready to advance or to retreat, strike or to counter, as the case might require. "That lacked only a primer, powder and bit of lead to be foul murder; but this—this is a breezy old joke, and—how's that for a sample snicker, old pal?"

In and out, quick as a flash, a feint, and then a counter as Dogood tried to get home a blow; and as the detective laughed lightly on the retreat, a trickle of blood began to streak the flushed face of his antagonist.

It was a blow which cut, without stunning, and the smart pain sent John Dogood forward in a fierce lust for revenge. He struck as he came, hoping to corner his adversary and bring on the issue through the weight of his rush. But Breeze never gave an inch, his ready arms proving an impenetrable guard until that storm of blows grew less wicked, through lack of breath to back them up.

Then he did more than guard; he led, time and again, every blow reaching the mark, every counter being evaded by ducking or by guarding.

Even so soon the end was nigh, for, desperately as John Dogood fought on, he knew that he stood no show with this mocking pugilist, whose breezy chaff never let up, whose tongue was fully as nimble as were his hard fists.

"Just a joke, old man! Stand up and be knocked down! Why, cully, it's nothing when you once get used to it, and then you have the use of your hands—if you only knew better how to use them! While I was trussed up like a—Come again and more power to your elbow!"

Bob Breeze evidently intended to keep his promise, for he confined his efforts for a time to the face of his adversary, only ceasing when there was hardly room for another bruise or cut. Then he devoted his attention to Dogood's wind, sending in blow after blow on the "soft spot" just above the belt, all the time guarding so perfectly that not a single mark could be seen upon his lightly flushed face.

Then, sending the weight of his body after it, he sent in a blow that felled Dogood, in a gasping heap on the stones.

CHAPTER XIX.

ROBERT DRESSES FOR COMPANY.

BOB BREEZE stood at ease, his arms lightly folded, his breath only slightly quickened by his recent exertions, smiling broadly as he gazed upon the victim of his little joke.

"What you taking a lay-off for, cully? Get up, man! Don't tell me you're tired, so quick!"

"Don't—I'm not able for you—that way!" panted Dogood, making a deprecatory gesture with one trembling hand.

"Any other way you like better, cully? Can you play pins? Can you do anything better than keel over and cock a leg, like any other whiffet when a dog comes 'round? Can you—oh, man, dear! rise up, if only to see how neatly I can knock you down again!"

"I can't—you held the edge over me from the start, dug-gun ye! Even if I'd licked you, you'd come back with a shot, so—"

"Stop right where you are, John Dogood!" sharply interrupted the man from Chicago, losing his breeziness for the time being, his face stern and hard-set, his eyes glittering dangerously. "Didn't I give you a fair shake? Did I lay even a finger-tip on you before I put away my tools? Talk white, if it's in you, man!"

"Yes, but—well, if I had licked, wouldn't you have shot?"

"Not on the old score, and not on a new one, unless you made the first motion. Now, you're more scared than hurt. Get up, and say when you're ready for a fresh start. I made up my mind to thrash you for the dirty shake you gave me yesterday, and if you're not satisfied I'm your master, I'll gladly supply the proof."

Johnny Dogood mumbled something, but he rose only to a sitting posture, gingerly wiping

his dripping nose, then feeling of his rapidly puffing cheeks and eyelids.

Taken all-in-all, he presented such a doleful figure that, his anger vanishing, Bob Breeze burst into a hearty laugh. Dogood responded with a sickly grin, and the war-clouds seemed rapidly disappearing.

"All right, cully," said the new recruit, pulling down his sleeves, and then offering a friendly hand. "I'll not rub it in quite so deep as I intended, first-off, and let you play you stopped because you wanted to, not because you were whipped. Now—is it wipe out the old score and begin afresh?"

"Do you mean it?" hesitated the defeated knave, doubtfully.

"Or I'd never make the offer—shake, cully!"

Their right hands met, and if Dogood lent any the less cordiality to the grip, Breeze never mentioned it.

"That makes us even, joke for joke, cully, and now for a bit of clean water to scrub off the dust. Up you come—steady on your pins, pard! Folks'll reckon you've lifted your jag in a mortal hurry, if you make many more such lurches!"

"I feel like I'd been fooling with the butt-end of a mule! You sling a powerful nasty pair of dukes, Breezy!"

"And you would read my eyes wrongly, cully. Every time you'd try to duck or dodge, you pushed your head right where I tried to shove my paws. And so—we couldn't either of us help its coming out just so!"

Robert gave this explanation in his easiest, breeziest manner, and if Johnny was not contented, that was his fault. Surely victor never took more pains to soothe the vanquished than did the man from Windy City on this occasion.

He brought back the confiscated belt of arms, and buckled it in place, even before resuming his own weapons. That indication of brotherly faith was not lost on the defeated rascal, and from that moment it was no longer a question of war between the couple.

With a view to removing the marks of fighting as much as might be, Breeze aided Dogood down the steep bank to the water's edge, not far from where Alick McGregor dragged Gilbert Sprague to land the day before. A liberal washing improved matters considerably, though Johnny would find it no easy task to convince inquiring friends that he had not been on the war-path with disastrous results to himself.

Until all this was accomplished, Bob Breeze avoided words which could sting or rankle, but then, as the partners settled down in a shady nook where the agreeable breeze came floating to them up the river, he spoke in rather serious tones:

"Now, Johnny, for the last time: you played me a dirty trick over yonder. Chief or no chief, 'twas as foul a deal as ever one man gave to another, his pal!"

"Well—I just had to, Breezy!" mumbled Dogood.

"I know that's your excuse, Johnny, and lacking a better one, I'm taking it in for all it's worth. I'm willing to bury the past and say nothing more about it, if you are. How is it, cully?"

"I'd be worse than a hog if I asked anything better, Breezy."

"Good enough, and bury goes! Another pal sold me, and you bruised your mug by trying to crack a boulder with your head for a hammer. Now—how are you fixed for dust, cully?"

"Poorly enough, mate. I dropped what little I had left, Saturday night, at the Gold Coin. I never did know enough to buck faro, but when there's such a daisy dealer—go 'way common sense!"

"What sort of a daisy, Johnny? Unless you've changed your caliber most remarkably since I knew you in Chicago, you'd never go into ecstasies over a man, dealer or no dealer. So—female, eh?"

"Bet your sweet life, Bobby! And such a female! If ever you see her once—but you just can't help it! Nobody even tries."

"They just drift that way, like black sand to a magnet, eh?"

"Sure! And—well, I'd rather hear her laugh at my beautiful mug, than never hear her chirp at all."

By his manner, even more than his words, Johnny Dogood betrayed how deeply he had been smitten by this Gold Coin sorceress, and Bob Breeze showed a growing interest in the matter as he drew forth some money to press it into the half-reluctant hand of his old-time mate.

"Hide it, cully, and don't rouse my Ebenezer by mentioning such a trifle. Go try your luck again, and—am I to congratulate you, pard?"

"Don't I wish I might say yes?" with a rueful sigh. "No, pard. The Gold Coin Venus isn't for the likes o' me—worse luck! I do reckon Bailey Pemberton holds a mortgage on that claim, though it's never been filed for record, that I can learn."

With a few adroitly put questions Bob Breeze gained sufficient knowledge from that quarter. He learned that the saloon and gambling-house known to all the sports as the Gold Coin, boasted of a woman faro-dealer, who was popularly known as Lady Venus. She was beautiful as a

dream, according to Johnny, and chaste as ice, so far as he could bear witness.

She lived in a comfortable house which stood nearly alone, not far from the northeastern limits of the town, and which Dogood shortly after pointed out to his interested friend. It was generally thought she would eventually marry Bailey Pemberton, the Gold Coin Sport, although no such announcement had been made.

Bob Breeze listened to all this with lazy interest, then dropping the subject after saying that he rather reckoned he'd have to drop in at the Gold Coin while taking in the sights, that evening.

"Just to see how far your fancy has outrun your good taste, cully! I've met up with a few of these mining-camp beauties, and—well, so far I've preserved a whole heart!"

"I'll lay you two to one that Lady Venus makes that same heart go flitter-flutter the first look, Bobby!" enthusiastically declared Dogood, as they turned to climb the bank to the level. "Don't I know? Haven't I been there? Only—my poor mug! how she'll laugh when she lays eyes on your frescoco, Bobby!"

Johnny Dogood offered to show his pal the way to the Empire Hotel, but he did so with such a rueful expression upon his battered face that Breeze laughingly refused to avail himself of the kindness.

"Reckon I can find my own way, Johnny, and with you in tow, maybe I'd have to lick half a dozen inquisitive critters before getting under cover of the hashery. So—I'll see you this evening?"

"Unless my eyes are swelled too tight for navigating, yes."

"Well, if you can't do better, drop in on me at the hotel. I haven't talked myself nearly out, yet, and, as brothers, Johnny, we want to keep near enough to touch elbows. Understand?"

"That's all right, pardner. I'll not lose sight of you. So-long!"

Following the directions given him by Dogood, Breeze readily made his way to the Empire, and showing a card to the landlord, who also acted as clerk in the daytime, he received answer that his baggage was safely awaiting his coming, having been left there by the Saturday evening stage.

"Good enough, landlord, and you can put the kindness down in your bill. Now—I know it's betwixt and between, but I'm hungry enough to get away with a cold wolf! Can't you send me a bushel or two of solid chuck to my room?"

As he spoke, Breeze pushed a dollar toward the host, and in consequence was given the reply he most desired. The waiter loaded with cold eatables was quickly at his door, and taking it in, Breeze seated himself on the edge of the narrow bed, his brain fully as busy as his teeth for the next half-hour.

It could hardly be said that he was fully satisfied with the knowledge he had extracted from Johnny Dogood, but on one point he was firmly resolved: he must have a closer, squarer view of the person Dogood had pointed out as Hawley Sprague. It was the manner in which that interview had best be brought about that engaged his wits, just then.

Having satisfied his appetite for the present, Breeze opened the stout valise which he had forwarded by stage in advance of his own coming, and laying out a fresh suit of clothes, with fairly presentable linen, he doffed his dusty habiliments, taking as thorough a bath as he could contrive with the limited appliances at hand, then dressing himself as carefully as though bound on a "sparking expedition."

"Might be worse," was his verdict, as he viewed himself by means of a little hand-glass which his well-stocked valise afforded. "Looks sort of solid, yet with a touch of the sport sprinkled over the get-up. Maybe 'twouldn't pass current in Chicago, but out here—'twill do."

Carefully stowing away his extras, locking the valise and pushing it under the bed, Breeze took up the waiter and left the chamber, locking the door behind him.

All this had consumed time, and as he descended the stairs, Breeze heard the first bell ringing for supper. Despite all he had eaten, that sound seemed to sharpen his appetite, and after a brief hesitation he concluded to postpone his contemplated visit until later.

The evening meal dispatched, he strolled into the office and bar combined, purchasing a cigar of the host, with whom he interchanged a few idle remarks, then leisurely left the hotel, like one who had nothing more important than killing time on his hands. But when fairly clear of the hotel, Bob Breeze quickened his steps, heading direct for the building which Johnny Dogood had indicated as the Sprague residence.

CHAPTER XX.

A HOOK BAITED IN VAIN.

A DIM light was visible at several of the windows in the front of the house, and Bob Breeze turned into the front yard with a fair prospect of finding Hawley Sprague at home, if, indeed, he had yet finished his supper.

"If not, I don't mind waiting, thank you, sir," muttered the detective, to himself. "In

fact, I reckon I'd be all the better fixed if I did have a little longer time in which to bait my hook. Will I catch a sucker, or will it prove a shark?"

Reaching the door, Bob Breeze rapped briskly, and almost instantly the barrier swung open, to give him a glimpse of the banker, hat on head, as though just on the point of taking his departure.

"I wish to see Mr. Hawley Sprague," spoke the visitor, tipping his hat with an off-hand bow.

"That's my name, sir," curtly began the banker, but before he could say more, the detective grasped his hand, giving it a hearty shake, and at the same time adding the first of the grips taught him by Johnny Dogood.

Contrary to his hopes, if not his expectations, the answering grip did not come, though the banker quickly, almost rudely freed his hand.

"Then I'm in great luck, my dear sir!" effusively declared the detective, "I wish to see you—"

"I'm sorry, but I've an important appointment which I can not postpone for idle ceremony," curtly interposed Sprague, making no move to admit the caller. "My time is precious, sir, and—"

"How much do you value your time at, Mr. Sprague? You're a man of business, and I'm another. Set your figures, sir, and if I can't meet them on the nail, then I'll step aside and say no more."

"You say you have business with me?" hesitated the banker, taken aback by this blunt proposition.

"Or I wouldn't be bluffing against such a pointed hint, my dear sir," with a dry chuckle.

"My business hours are past, and now—Can't you call to-morrow, at the bank?"

"I could, but I'd rather pay you for a brief interview right now, Mr. Sprague. Your time is worth—say an hour?"

Hawley Sprague gave way at that, and with precious little show of bashfulness, Bob Breeze crossed the threshold, doffing his hat and following the banker into the little office which we have paid a prior visit. And as he closed the door behind them, Sprague nodded toward a chair, saying coldly:

"Now sir, please explain."

With a brisk movement the detective produced a pocketbook, unstrapping it as he asked, once more:

"How much is an hour of your time worth, dear sir?"

"What do you mean by such a question, sir?" frowningly asked his unwilling host.

"That I stand ready to buy an hour of your valuable time, the same to begin from the moment you finger the hard cash. So—the figure?"

That frown changed to a smile, and sinking into a chair near his desk, the banker spoke in more agreeable tones:

"Put up your pocketbook, sir. That jest is growing old. Of course I can accept no payment for giving you a few minutes, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Breeze—Robert Breeze, last from Chicago, to leave out minor places and halts. And—by the way, sir, haven't we met before this evening?"

Ever since entering that room the detective had been making good use of his eyes, trying to determine whether or no Johnny Dogood had been correct in hinting that this reputable citizen of Eureka was in reality none other than the mysterious chief of the road-agents.

So far as height and build was concerned, there was a fair agreement. The voice sounded different, but that might be accounted for by the hood which the chief had worn, muffling and altering his tones.

The shape of the head, too, agreed tolerably well with that of the bearded patriarch whom Breeze had "held up" at command of his captor, the day before. But—was it really the same person?

Hawley Sprague shook his head in the negative at that blunt query.

"I think not, and I have a very good memory for faces and voices. Why do you think we have ever met, may I ask?"

"Oh, the fancy just happened to strike me, and whatever comes into my head, is mighty apt to leak out by way of my tongue! Fact is, my dear sir, that I was born talking, and I haven't been able to get weaned ever since. And so—"

"Did you take all this trouble just to tell me this, Mr. Breeze?"

"In other words, I'm wasting your time and my opportunity? True for you, Mr. Sprague, and the more shame me! Now—business goes, and—do you care about coming into one of the finest things on earth, my dear sir? A speculation which will pay at the very lowest calculation one hundred per cent the first year, and before the end of the second, ten times that much?"

The banker leaned back in his chair, his half-amused smile changing to a sneer, as he coldly spoke:

"Another marvelous mine—in prospective, of course!"

Bob Breeze opened his eyes widely, with an expression of bewildered surprise creeping into

his face. For a few moments he stared at his host, then he spluttered forth:

"Why, how on earth—how did you know that?"

Hawley Sprague laughed outright this time, but his tones were cold and even contemptuous as he made reply:

"Because I've met scores and scores of just such gentlemen as 'you are, Mr. Breeze. Because I've had to sit and listen to just such tales of uncounted—uncounted, bear in mind!—wealth, which may be mine for simply advancing cash enough to perfect the development of the marvelous bonanza."

"And you—well, well, this does take the cake!"

"And I just as often told them, what I now tell you: not any in mine, I thank you, sir!"

"But—this isn't like them, you know, dear sir!"

"Of course not; it never is."

"And I'm not asking you to risk a single dollar without first satisfying yourself that I've got precisely what I claim, the one greatest and most glorious opportunity of a lifetime! Why, my dear sir, if you'll believe me—"

"I'd really like to believe you, Mr. Breeze, but it's flatly against my rules. Wait until your prospect is something more: wait until you can show me a fairly-developed mine, and then I'll talk to you. But until you can do that, words are breath spent in vain."

"But—my hour is not up, please bear in mind," with a faint smile which was plainly forced. "But, if you'd only give me a chance to explain just how and in what manner I became possessed of the information on which I'm building my hopes of a vast fortune, sir?"

"If you insist on going through all this, sir, of course I must submit. You are beneath my roof, and hence, in a degree, my guest. Still, I tell you once for all that you are simply wasting your breath and my time. I have no money to risk in such ventures. If I once broke my rigid rule in this respect, I would be driven to bankruptcy inside of the year!"

"Or—better, by far—a millionaire, with bigger dividends in sight than even Jay Gould can boast of!"

"You really have such firm faith in your find, then?" asked Sprague, with a deepening of that contemptuous smile about his thin lips.

"And I'll wager your own amount, Mr. Sprague, that I can convince you I'm really right, if you'll only grant me time and opportunity."

"I never lay wagers, sir."

"Never—great heavens, sir, how do you spend your idle moments, then?" almost gasped the detective, his eyes widely distended.

"I have no idle moments, in your sense of the term, Mr. Breeze," the banker said, with growing hauteur, rising to his feet. "And now, if you have received your answer, sir, perhaps—"

Bob Breeze jerked forth an open-faced Waterbury, to glance at the hands, then forced a smile as he replaced the article.

"Ten minutes to the good, my dear sir! Now—you positively refuse to reach forth a hand to pick up this vast fortune?"

"I positively decline—exactly."

The detective heaved a vast sigh, a pitying expression on his face, as he gazed intently at that face, then lowering his eyes until they had covered each foot of that erect figure. He seemed lost in wondering pity, but in reality he was keenly comparing that form with those of the hills, where he had encountered such strange experiences.

Doubtless he would never be given a more favorable opportunity for making that comparison, and he bade his eyes and wits do their duty to the best of their ability.

"He declines!" softly sighed the detective, as though to himself. "He flatly refuses to just pick up an almighty fortune! And never says so much as thank you for the offer given him!"

Despite his coldness, Hawley Sprague flushed a little at those last words, and a touch of anger came into his voice as he retorted:

"Why should I thank you for an offer which I—to put it plainly—scorn? If I was foolish enough to listen to you, with a view to investing my money, then there might be room for talking about thanks and gratitude. But—for the last time, sir, I decline!"

"Then—there's no use in saying anything more, I suppose?"

"Not the slightest use, Mr. Breeze."

With another sigh, the detective slowly rose to his feet, admirably playing his part from start to finish, seeming the hopeful yet impecunious "rainbow-chaser" which forms such a picturesque portion of the mining regions life.

"And you don't happen to know of another capitalist in town who'd be likely to listen a bit more favorably, sir?"

"There's no lack of men with money in Eureka, Mr. Breeze, but the main difficulty in your way is—they know how to hold, as well as to gain."

"But—you wouldn't mind giving me just a line to some few of them? Just a word or two, so they'll be more apt to listen to what I have to say?"

"I would mind, most decidedly, sir!" retorted

Sprague, with a flush of actual anger at that impudent request. "I know nothing whatever of you, sir, and—excuse me if I add that I care to know less!"

"Which is the polite for kicking me out, isn't it?" mumbled Breeze, forcing a sickly smile as he picked up his hat and moved toward the door, to which the banker had strode, to hold it open with grim significance. "Well, good evening, sir! Your hand, in token that you hold no grudge against one who really hoped to make your fortune!"

And grasping that hand, Bob Breeze repeated the secret grip.

CHAPTER XXI.

WAS IT WORTH THE CANDLE?

WITH no other result than to have the hand withdrawn from his grasp, with a quick gesture toward the front exit. The secret signal was not answered, and nothing like the return grip came from those slender fingers.

"Good-by, dear sir, and may you never know what it is to lack a solid friend or a heavy banker when— Charming evening, isn't it? Seems to me I never knew a moon so full of holy calm and peaceful— Hope to thunder he caught a finger in the jamb!"

Hawley Sprague relentlessly ushered his visitor through the hall and across the threshold, closing the front door with an emphatic slam, the very instant Bob Breeze passed through.

As though the shock had something to do with it, the detective shot from steps to walk as though impelled by a heavy boot, leaving that sanguinary hope to float on the faint breeze behind him.

He lost little time in clearing the front yard, and to one whose eyes might have been watching his actions, Robert must have lent the impression of thorough defeat, combined with a healthy desire to vacate those quarters for more profitable ones.

But Bob Breeze was not quite ready to make that seeming retreat an actual one, and when fairly clear of those grounds, he crouched down where the shadows lay deepest, his gaze turned upon the house, his brain busier than ever.

"Fisherman's luck! Good time wasted, cheek worn to the quick, tongue blistered, and—never ketched a clam! Wonder if the sucker wasn't at the wrong end of the line, this time? Wonder if—wonder why—wonder no end!"

There was no sign of life about the Sprague house, except in the dimly-lighted windows. The front door remained closed, just as it had slammed back of the "lucky prospector's" heels a few moments before.

"Wonder if the old gentleman got so hot under the collar that he's clean forgot that important appointment he plead, first off?" mused the detective, settling himself down in a more comfortable attitude for waiting and watching. "Or—is he mourning over his foolish folly in throwing such a glorious chance over his shoulder as no good? Or—wonder if he's just brushing up his memory, by practicing the grip?"

Bob Breeze forced back to his mind's eye that tall figure, and that cold, stern face. He caused that voice to once more ring in his ears, and then he deliberately made comparison with what he had seen and heard of the road-agent chief.

Both build and height would serve, and so far as those points were concerned, Hawley Sprague might easily prove to be the chief, or the gray-beard of the stage trail, one or both, if the sign of the horseshoe had not misled the watchful detective.

His voice had sounded differently, with but few points in common with either of the others as recalled by Breeze; but that was a minor consideration, and one very easily accounted for.

"Is Hawley Sprague the boss?" Bob Breeze asked himself once more, all the while keeping a close watch over the building in front of his lurking place. "That's the main question, just at present; is he the high-muck-a-muck?"

"It may be so. Johnny Nogood may have put his finger squat on top of the wicked flea, first clatter! His build and lengthiness about fill the bill, making allowance for a different rig-out. But—if he is the boss, he certainly is not my pet game!"

Right there lay the sharpest disappointment, and Bob Breeze clicked his strong teeth together with a vicious disappointment as he recognized the naked facts.

Despite the plausible story to which he had stuck through thick and thin, never once wavering from the line marked out for himself in advance, Robert Breeze was still in harness as a detective, and he had come to this portion of Idaho in hopes of effecting a capture which had long been an object with the various agencies through the States, but which had almost come to be thought impossible now the trail had grown so cold.

"Is Hawley Sprague the boss?" once more the detective asked himself, doggedly sticking to his task. "I can't say, for sure, but—he positively is not Murray Nash! And Murray Nash is my particular game, this trip. If I hadn't hoped to find him of or among that outfit, I'd

never have jumped at Johnny's offer. Now—was I all fool in doing that? Didn't the boss show too much emotion, too great anxiety in testing me, not to have other reasons for fearing a trap than simply his hold-up doings out here? Then—is the boss and Murray Nash one and the same person?"

It was so easy to mentally shape questions, so difficult to give satisfactory answers to them all!

While at the cavern in which the outlaws found refuge, the detective felt almost convinced that he had found his valuable game, and had acted on that belief throughout. Johnny Dogood, who certainly ought to be able to give a fair guess in the matter, declared his belief that the boss might be found under the tall hat worn by Hawley Sprague. And so, hoping to clear all mists away, Bob Breeze had made this venture at the earliest practicable moment.

Now, he asked himself, had the game been worth the candle?

"He's not Murray Nash, so we'll just let that flea stick, for the present, old man," mused the detective, in confidential discourse with his own busy brain. "Now—is he the captain? That is not so dead certain as the other, but—one thing is clear enough.

"If Hawley Sprague is really the boss, then he's got mighty little faith in yours truly! If he is the chief, and he doesn't suspect me of being anything worse than a brother, why didn't he return the grip? I gave it twice, to make sure, and he—gave me the dirty shake, instead!"

Having put away all thoughts of Murray Nash for the time being, it was this particular fact which gave the detective by far the most uneasiness.

If Hawley Sprague was in reality the head of that lawless gang, why had he refused to answer the grip when given by a sworn brother? Only one reason suggested itself, and that was far from pleasant; he did not trust his latest recruit, and lack of trust implied actual peril.

"Was it because he felt anger at my so readily recognizing him? He mentioned no law against anything of that sort. How could he know but that I had important information to deliver, as soon as he had read his title clear, by giving me the grip?"

A low, grim chuckle rose in his throat as Bob Breeze hit upon another possible reason for that offishness.

"Wonder if he thought I was coming to play even for that dose of knock-me-stiff? Does that account for the sour milk in the nut?"

This possibility opened up a fresh vista through which questions came flocking in a disorderly procession, but Bob Breeze was not given time in which to even briefly argue the matter; the front door of the building he was keeping watch and ward over, opened to permit the exit of a human figure, which he had no difficulty in recognizing as that of the banker himself.

"Just come to 'member that 'pointment, eh?" softly breathed the detective, gathering his legs under him, ready for a bit of sly trailing. "Well, you took your own time about it, anyway! Hope the person you made that appointment with is blessed with an angelic disposition, for I'd hate most mightily to have you mauled—before I've fairly located you, anyway!"

Hawley Sprague seemed in no particular haste, and stood lounging at the front gate for a few minutes, gazing at the nearly full moon, while Bob Breeze kept keen watch over him.

"Moon-struck? Glory to Moses, bullrushes thrown in to make weight! Can it be a case of spoons? Was his appointment made with—well, what's the matter with Lady Venus, of the Gold Coin?"

Bob Breeze stifled a dry chuckle at that fancy, for there was a grotesque humor in the connection; the stiff, pompous, stately banker, paying his court to a gay, dashing siren of the green cloth!

"If that's the trick, I'm going to see it turned, or bu'st a tug!" was his conclusion as Hawley Sprague left the gate and moved briskly toward the main portion of the town. "No fool like an old fool, they say, and—who knows? I may get at the truth through his dizzy philandering this very night!"

It was not such a far-fetched fancy, taking human nature by and large, but this appeared to be Bob Breeze's off-night, and once more he found his calculations going astray.

Instead of seeking the Gold Coin Saloon, Hawley Sprague made his way direct to the building in which his bank was located, unlocking the door and passing inside, closing and securing the barrier behind him, as the detective's keen ears bore witness.

A few minutes later a dim light shone through the edges of the heavy wooden shutters with which each window was masked, and after a wary glance around, Bob Breeze crept on tiptoe to the one affording the broadest streak of light, fastening an eye to the crevice; only to smother a growl of intense disgust.

The inner shades were drawn, and he could see nothing at all.

He passed from one window to the other, but

the result of his spying was ever the same: not a glimpse could he catch of the interior, and Hawley Sprague was as safe from his eyes as though he had sought refuge in the far-away moon herself!

For some little time Bob Breeze hung around the bank building, in vague hopes of something turning up; just what that something might be, he would have found it no easy matter to explain. But he was loth to break away from a trail when once he had taken it up.

"And yet—what good can come of it?" he finally asked himself. "If he really is the boss, he surely can't mean to rob himself? And, as Hawley Sprague, the highly reputable banker of Eureka, I'll always know where to look for the gentleman!"

With that conclusion, unsatisfactory though he felt it, Bob Breeze was forced to rest content for the present; and turning away, he slowly beat a retreat, his head bowed, his brain very busy, trying to read the riddle which had presented itself for his consideration.

In his eagerness to learn if his particular game had been located, he knew now that he had acted with unwise haste, supposing that Johnny Dogood was correct in his surmise as to the identity of the boss with the banker. As the fairest excuse handy for his intrusion, he had given the secret grip, without recognition in kind. If Hawley Sprague was actually the captain, that refusal to acknowledge the bond of brotherhood, surely meant danger to the new recruit.

Bob Breeze was reflecting thus, when his attention was caught by a brightly illuminated sign: the representation of a double-eagle.

"The Gold Coin!" he muttered, casting off his moody thoughts for the moment. "What did Johnny say? Well, I never met a living Venus, to my knowledge; why not improve this chance?"

CHAPTER XXII.

BOB BREEZE STUDIES A HAND.

As so frequently happens when a man's carefully studied plans have come to naught, Bob Breeze was just in the humor to act on impulse, and only pausing for a summary glance at the outside of the building, which presented nothing out of the usual routine, he entered the open door, and stood for a moment surveying place and inmates.

The bar proper was directly opposite the front entrance, and gave evidence of a flourishing business, being both neatly and well supplied with all essentials, and not a few superfluities, considering its location in a comparatively new country. Of course it lacked considerable of reaching the standard set by our Eastern saloons, but, for Idaho, the Gold Coin was a model.

That the bar was well patronized, was made clear from the number present, early though the hour was, and as Bob Breeze advanced further from the threshold, a quick glance to the right, beyond a curtained archway, showed him a goodly number of gamblers already wooing the goddess of good luck at the gaming tables.

It was no part of his plans to invite attention to himself, and as the surest method of avoiding that, Bob Breeze passed along to the polished bar, quietly asking for whisky, in the shape of a cocktail. The mixing of that drink would give him a little leisure for taking notes, and modestly drawing back nearer the point where bar joined wall, he leaned lightly against the counter, one hand touching his temple: a position with which no fault could be found, yet which enabled him to shade the better part of his own face, while scrutinizing those of his present companions.

His glance passed quickly over all save a single face, the owner of which stood near the further end of the bar, squarely facing the detective just then, but as a new-comer cheerily spoke, his dark eyes turned in that direction.

"Hello! Bailey, old man, how goes it?" was the jovial greeting.

"Same old gait, Singleton," came the response, as their hands crossed in a cordial grip. "Just got in?"

"Came by stage, yes. Nothing gone wrong? The evening star still reigning in the heavens, eh?"

Bob Breeze, his attention caught by that first name, saw the tall sport give a barely perceptible nod toward the gaming department, but his gaze never wandered that way.

"Bailey, is it?" his thoughts ran, swiftly. "What did Johnny say? Bailey—Pemberton? Sure! Now, your photograph, Bailey Pemberton! Look pleasant—natural expression, my dear sir!"

The detective was not long in taking that mental photograph. He saw a tall, lithe figure, dressed neatly, as all gamblers dress, but lacking the touch of flashiness which so many of that ilk affect.

The face was a fine one: regular features, a bit too sternly cast, it might be; a heavy mustache of jetty blackness, drooping at the ends, almost concealing a firm mouth; hair closely cropped, of like hue, and almost hidden by the glossy silk hat.

A face which one will frequently run across in

a crowd, but one which is always sure to attract attention despite its frequency.

Just now this face possessed a peculiar attraction for the detective, and not until his cocktail was placed at his elbow did his keen gaze waver. For—here was still another face and figure which might easily fit in with his remembrance of the road-agent chief.

And, more than that: it was a face which, through cunning art, might have been altered from the one which Bob Breeze had journeyed so far in hopes of meeting: *the face of Murray Nash!*

Afraid to attract unwelcome attention his way, Bob Breeze turned to sip his drink, and at the same time one corner of his eye warned him that Pemberton and Singleton were both slowly moving toward the door, as though about to leave the saloon.

They did more: they crossed the threshold, and were lost to view.

"Shall I follow? Is it worth the risk? Has he noticed me?"

Two negatives carried the day, and the detective remained, sipping his cocktail with the enjoyment of a connoisseur. If this Bailey was Bailey Pemberton in fact, there could be scant trouble in again striking his trail. And if he was really the captain, any attempt at shadowing him now would be dangerous.

"He don't carry those keen eyes in his head for nothing," Bob Breeze argued in his mind. "If he is the boss, he sure he didn't overlook my coming. If so, what'd he think if I was to follow? That, for a new recruit, I was trying to learn too much, too fast. So—Lady Venus takes precedence!"

Doubtless this was by far the wisest course to follow, provided his surmises were founded on facts, but it was hard work, nevertheless. In common with all detectives, there was a touch of the bloodhound in his composition, and, like the dog, Bob Breeze was hard to choke off the trail when once the scent was fairly caught.

Paying for his drink and a cigar, Robert lit the last, then carelessly passed from the bar beneath the curtained arch, taking notes as he leisurely moved toward the faro-table which stood at one side of the spacious apartment.

Where only the ordinary conditions prevailed, the hour would have been far too early for anything like a lively game, but in that respect the Gold Coin faro-table was an exception. And as he took note of the presiding genius, Bob Breeze felt scant surprise that such should be the case.

In the dealer's chair was seated a woman; young enough to possess all the charms of maidenhood, yet old enough to command the respect due full maturity.

Her height had to be guessed at, since she was seated, but Robert at once put her down as something over the average altitude of her sex. Her figure was easier estimated: perfect! No other term could do it justice.

Her dress was of rich silk, cut low in the neck, which was filled in with filmy lace, and with low sleeves, where other laces drooped to her dimpled elbows.

Her hair, yellow as coined gold, was carefully dressed, and jewel-tipped pins glistened and sparkled under the light as she moved.

Her face was all that Johnny Dogood had pictured, and Bob Breeze smiled faintly as he felt a thrill of admiration creep over him; had not his old-time pard predicted as much?

And yet, he felt a sharp disappointment, as well, for he had looked for further confirmation of his suspicions: *this* woman was as unlike the woman of the stage-trail, in her color and her face, as could well be imagined.

"That one was dark and sallow, *this* one is light and perfect in complexion! Wonder where she bought it?" half-cynically mused the detective, as he drew nearer the table.

As he approached, he glanced over the players, half expecting to see Johnny Dogood among their number, despite the heavy punishment he had received that afternoon. Such a charming face would excuse even a harder venture than that, thought Robert; but he failed to find the one he was looking for. If Dogood meant to try his luck again with the stake his victor had fairly forced upon him, he had not yet put in an appearance.

Bob Breeze stood silently by, watching both game and dealer for some little time. Although he could hardly believe the two women, so unlike to the outward eye, were one and the same, he decided that it might pay him to study this Lady Venus a bit closer.

"If yonder tall sport is the captain, *he* surely ought to be the lieutenant," his thoughts ran. "If *he* was the graybeard, *she* must have been the gray-vail. If neither—well, there's time enough, and no harm that I can see in trying to clear one's expenses."

As the last card was drawn from the silver box, one of the players, whose ill-luck had drained his modest capital, rose from his seat, and Bob Breeze immediately slipped into it, quietly watching those plump, white, bejeweled fingers as they deftly rippled the deck preparatory to beginning a new deal.

When the deck was slipped inside the box, and this was squared in front of Lady Venus, the detective leaned a bit forward, asking:

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but, as I'm a stranger here, will you kindly tell me the limit?"

Did Lady Venus give a start, and change color slightly as she heard that voice and met that gaze? Bob Breeze certainly fancied she did both, and that belief did not lessen his interest.

If so, she quickly rallied, for her tones were clear and mellow as she made reply:

"The game is wide open, sir, and limited only by the cash on your side of the table. Make your game, gentlemen!"

"Thanks, awfully!" bowed the man from Chicago, producing his wallet and laying out a few bills of no very large denomination.

Few are the words spoken across the faro table, and this was no exception to the general rule. "Money talks," and under those fair fingers the cards decided all points. Bets were made, won and lost, the fortunate players quietly accepting their winnings, the unlucky ones seeking consolation in an extra glance into that beautiful face across the table.

Despite his opening question, which, in fact, had been asked simply in order to surprise a fair look from the eyes of Lady Venus, Breeze played but lightly, losing far oftener than he won. And all the while he was stealing looks at the face opposite, trying to determine what foundation on truth, if any, his dim suspicions might have.

Then, almost without being conscious of the fact, he fell to studying the fair left hand with which Lady Venus steadied the faro-box, and slipped forth the cards in deliberate rotation.

His notice was first called that way by what seemed an unusual nervousness, or restlessness of those dimpled fingers. Was it unfair dealing that made him lose so steadily?

Such was his first thought, and he fell to watching those fingers with a view to solving that ugly doubt. But then—surely his eyes were playing him false?

Those fingers were forming letters in accordance with the telegraphic code! If only he had learned the trick! But he only knew sufficient to feel sure that Lady Venus was telegraphing to—Whom?

He cast a swift glance around, to see whose eyes were betraying especial interest in her fingers, but saw nothing to satisfy him. Then, as he fell once more to studying that fair hand, its movements changed.

During a pause in the game, where a player was arranging his bets, Lady Venus took up the deaf and dumb alphabet, and deftly formed the symbols which read:

"Follow me—follow me—follow me!"

With a peculiar thrill creeping up and down his back, Bob Breeze lifted his eyes—to meet her gaze fixed squarely upon his face!

CHAPTER XXIII.

TRAILING A VENUS.

THE man from Chicago threw a question into his eyes, and unless he was widely mistaken, Lady Venus answered it in the affirmative.

Still, the detective could be certain of but one thing: that the beautiful faro-queen was signaling some person to follow her.

He believed that the silent message was intended for him, alone, but belief was not certainty, and just then he preferred to not take any long chances.

Before he could make any sign by replying to which he might make sure those signals were intended for him alone, the chance was lost. It was but the customary pause on the dealer's side, to permit those who so desired, to place their bets on the last turn.

Bob Breeze was not one of that number. For one thing his losses had pretty well depleted his scanty lay-out of bills, and for another, he was busy over a little trick through which he hoped to make his belief a certainty.

Holding a card in the hollow of his left hand, he used a pencil to hastily yet clearly scrawl the words:

"Your fingers say 'follow me.' Do you really mean it?"

When the cards were shuffled and boxed for the new deal, Breeze gave a preliminary bow, then passed this card over to Lady Venus, at the same time asking:

"Excuse me, ma'am, but is that name good, here?"

The dealer took the card, and read the writing thereon without the slightest change of countenance, but she nodded distinctly as her eyes crossed to meet that steady gaze.

"The name is perfectly good, sir, as far as that goes, but it is a rule of the house that only hard cash plays. Sorry, but—"

"Oh, don't mention it, ma'am, I beg!" interrupted the detective, with a deprecatory bow and wave of the hand. "The only difference is that I'll have to hit you lightly until I can see my banker."

Lady Venus accepted his explanation with a barely perceptible nod, and the written card vanished after some mysterious fashion, now that she was in readiness to begin the dealing. Her eyes were giving the painted lay-out the customary glance of the dealer, as the gamblers placed their bets after being shown the "soda" card. But her fingers were busy, once more forming the words:

"Follow me—follow me—follow me!"

After all this, Bob Breeze could no longer doubt that he was the person to whom those signals were directed, and, as may readily be surmised, the game itself held very slight attractions for him.

Still, he acted his part well, making several bets as the deal went on, and only rising from his seat when a couple of losses on successive turns afforded him a favorable opportunity for drawing out of the game.

His action was quietly taken, but as he rose to his feet, Lady Venus flashed a glance that way, her head given a perceptible inclination, her big eyes asking a mute question.

Bob Breeze glanced toward her left hand, then nodded quickly. Her eyes drooped, and the dealing went on without a perceptible break.

As many another luckless gambler has done, Breeze seemed unable to tear himself away from the table across which his money had drifted, hanging around the outside, watching, and no doubt envying each lucky coup of the players.

He was rather expecting another move on the part of Lady Venus, if only to afford him a more definite clew, nor was he forced to wait much longer for it.

As the last turn was made, Lady Venus turned the box over—that being the regular signal given by "the bank" when, for any reason, it is deemed best or necessary for the game to close.

This action caused a startled murmur to rise from among the players, but Lady Venus paid them barely attention enough to coldly say:

"Only for the moment, gentlemen, so please shed no tears of mourning over the bank. Mr. Mathison, if you please?"

A flashily dressed fellow came hastily forward from one of the round side-tables held sacred to short-card playing, and Lady Venus added:

"Oblige me by asking Mr. Pemberton to step this way. My head aches, and I wish to go home, as soon as may be."

Bob Breeze, having received his proper cue, as he believed, slouched lazily along in the wake of the gambler, who hastened toward the bar, doubtless to bear that message to the proprietor. He met Mathison at the archway, on his return, and felt just a bit taken aback as he failed to see aught of the tall sport, who he had decided must be the proprietor of the Gold Coin establishment.

"Caught in the middle, and shut out at both ends! Well, if I can't hear, what's the matter with seeing?"

With that philosophical reflection, Breeze moved along to the bar, giving his order for a plain whisky, and, as once before, taking up a station from whence he could command a fair view of all that might be going on, in bar or in the apartment beyond.

He saw Mathison make his way to the table over which Lady Venus had been presiding, and from their attitudes, no doubt he was explaining why he had returned without filling his mission.

Then the woman left her chair, lifting a lace shawl from where it had hung over the chair-back, twisting it gracefully over her head and about her shoulders, Mathison the while assuming the position she had just vacated.

"Good as old wheat!" mentally decided the detective, as he tossed off his drink and paid for it. "She's just little old business, from the start! Now—she comes, and I go!"

Lady Venus was moving toward the saloon proper, and Bob Breeze at once left the building. So far as his keen eyes had told him, there was no side-exit, and if Lady Venus passed out at the front door, it would be an easy matter for him to pick up her trail.

"Then, too, reckon she'd just as soon I wouldn't make an open show of tagging her royal highness," muttered the detective, as he crossed the street in order to gain the deeper shadows. "Follow me! eh? Follow me where, and why, and what for? If I was a frescoed angel of love and beauty, like Johnny Nogood, for instance, wouldn't I be feeling in clover clear up to my lips, with every blossom dripping double distilled honey? Wouldn't I call it a mash of the purest description? Wouldn't I—be feeling a mighty sight more comfortable about the midriff?"

If there had been sufficient light to reveal his features, one might have seen an anxious frown upon that face, in place of the bland grin of the professional "masher."

Bob Breeze, despite his often-tested courage, was feeling far from easy as he awaited the appearance of Lady Venus, just then.

Was his first suspicion founded on fact? Was this really beautiful woman gambler the same who had played a double role out in the hills? Was she the fun-loving second in command over that gang of cut-throats?

"If Bailey Pemberton is the chief, then I reckon it's pretty safe to set Lady Venus down as his pal," was the conclusion reached by the detective, just as that almost regal figure showed itself in the open doorway of the Gold Coin.

One hand held the lace shawl close to her throat, the filmy folds framing her charming face as she cast a swift glance up and then down

the street, not so much after the fashion of one expecting to see some particular person, as with the unconscious air of one who naturally hesitated an instant before leaving light for darkness.

Bob Breeze smiled grimly as he noted that look. He thought he knew the person for whom Lady Venus was searching, but he made no move, gave no sign, quietly awaiting her further actions.

"I'm going the whole hog blind, my lady!" flashed through his brain as he took notes. "Reckon 'twon't hurt you to take a weeny bit on faith, for—business, old man!"

Lady Venus stepped into the open air, turning to the right, walking at a brisk pace away from the Gold Coin. She seemed to have but a single object in view: to reach home as quickly as might be.

Bob Breeze stole silently along in the same direction, but keeping on the opposite side of the street until Lady Venus made another turn, which led at right angles with her former course. Even then he showed no wish to join the woman, or even to greatly lessen the distance which separated them from the start.

"It may just be a case of mash, but I'm not betting that way! I'd feel a mighty sight safer if I could only think it, too! But—almost any odds you like, that it's all a plant to catch your uncle!"

While taking extra care not to lose sight of Lady Venus even for an instant, Bob Breeze was none the less on the guard against a possible surprise from other quarters. Although he could give no actual proof that mischief was brewing rapidly, he felt positive that he was about to see trouble of some description.

Time and again he told himself that it would only be the part of prudence to abandon that trail. He had little to gain, and much to lose, by taking the risk of an assignation of this description. Unless—

"Maybe it's only another test they're trying to pull off!" he reflected, with an inward chuckle of grim scorn. "Maybe Johnny was in the right, and the old gent has telephoned madame to find out what I meant by bearding him in his lair, so terribly sudden! Maybe—and so on, to the end of the chapter!"

With his interest so thoroughly awakened, it was difficult for Bob Breeze to keep such wild fancies from drifting across his busy brain, even when he knew that they were more than improbable.

So far Lady Venus had betrayed no open curiosity as to whether she was being followed or not, moving steadily onward, gradually leaving the business portion of the town behind her. And, trailing her steps as faithfully as ever red Indian tracked his deadliest foe-man, the detective looked in vain for aught savoring of treachery. No one crossed their path to give trouble, and keenly, constantly as he kept watch, no person appeared to be dogging the shadower.

The faint roaring of the river as the waters crossed the rapids above the bridge, reminded Breeze of his encounter with Johnny Dogood, and from that it was natural enough to recall the buildidg which had been pointed out to him as the one in which the Gold Coin Venus made her home.

"She's striking direct for the shanty," the detective decided, as he gave their surroundings a comprehensive glance. "Means to have the old man all to her lonesome, 'pears likel! Well—that depends!"

As Lady Venus drew near that lone building, she paused for a look backward, but Bob Breeze was fully upon the alert, and instantly sunk flat to the ground, where his body blended with the gloom too perfectly for her eyes to distinguish aught.

Her pause was of brief duration, however, and then she made her way direct to the front door, opening it with a key, the keen ears of Bob Breeze catching the sharp click as the bolt was shot.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MAN NAMED MURRAY NASH.

"WHAT comes next?"

The man from Chicago asked himself this question as he crouched low in front of the house, staring blankly at the door through which the Gold Coin Venus had vanished from sight.

"She said follow, and I've followed! Now—how much further ought I to venture? Out here I've plenty of room to shake my legs. In yonder I'd have—what?"

It was by no means an easy question to answer with anything like satisfaction to himself, and for a brief space Bob Breeze was wholly at a loss what to do next.

If his suspicions were correct, and Lady Venus was really the pal of the road-agent chief, why this secret invitation? Why did she wish him to visit her under her own roof? Had they repented their leniency of the prior day, and were they seeking to lure him into a trap from whence he would have no show of escaping?

"Reckon they don't know what a good man can do with his guns!" the detective grimly

chuckled, as he used the sense of touch to assure himself that both revolvers were in perfect condition. "And—blamed if I take dare from a woman!"

Springing to his feet, Bob Breeze boldly advanced to the front of the building, lifting a hand to rap upon a panel; but before his knuckles could perform that office, the barrier was swung open, and a mellow voice pronounced the words:

"Come in, sir, if your name is Robert Breeze!"

"That's my name, for lack of a better, ma'am," promptly replied the detective, lifting his hat as he stepped upon the threshold.

"Thank heaven! then I made no mistake!" in strongly agitated tones, as her hand closed upon his arm, urging him inside. "Come, sir! I am so impatient to tell you all! I am so—stay, while I strike a light!"

Bob Breeze, having taken his resolve, quietly obeyed that touch, and gave no sign of uneasiness, even when he heard the door close behind them both with a click suspiciously like that of a spring-lock.

There came a gentle swish of skirts, then the scratching of a match. A faint glimmer speedily changed to a mellow light as match touched wick, and by the lamp's rays, Bob Breeze caught a fair look at his hostess.

It was Lady Venus, of course, no longer wearing the shawl with which she had partially masked her face while on the way from the Gold Coin. But now her face was paler than usual, and her great eyes, her quivering lips, lent an expression of strong agitation or subdued excitement to her really charming face.

She hastily moved a chair for his acceptance, begging him to be seated, at the same time sinking into a seat at the opposite side of the center table, on which the lamp stood.

Bob Breeze accepted the seat, but only after moving it to some little distance from the spot where her hand left it standing. He had heard of such things as secret trap-doors, and he was not taking any longer chances than he could avoid, just then.

"Thanks," he bowed, as he seated himself, placing his hat in his lap, where it masked his revolver which he had prudently hitched around on his belt, to have it convenient for use in case of need. "Then I was not mistaken when I read the words your fingers shaped, ma'am?"

Lady Venus quickly covered her face with her hands, seemingly overcome by shame at the memory; but if so, she quickly rallied, and smiled faintly while asking:

"What did you think, Mr. Breeze? Something terrible, no doubt!"

"Well, I thought you wanted to see me pretty bad: on business, of course," he answered, with a modest bow.

"On business, yes! And such business! Sir, tell me that I have not made a mistake? You are really a detective? You really are one of Pinkerton's men?"

"May I ask what gave you that impression, ma'am?"

"It is more than an impression, sir!" with a frown passing swiftly across her face. "I have seen you before, though you never knew me, even if you ever saw me."

"Once seen, never forgotten, with such a face as yours, ma'am!"

"Then—you remember when and where we met?"

"Never before, to my knowledge, ma'am. And I have a very good memory for faces, too. I fear you are mistaken when you think—"

"I am not mistaken. Your name is Robert Breeze, and at the time I saw you—'twas in open court—you were dubbed in the Chicago papers, 'Pinkerton's Pet!'"

"That was several years ago, ma'am, and many a change can be crowded into a much briefer space than that. I've known men called honest at the start, to turn out human zebras in the end."

As he spoke, Bob Breeze watched the effects of his words closely. If Lady Venus was what he rather more than suspected, surely she would betray some sign at that hidden meaning.

Instead, she only gave him back a puzzled look, then, like one casting aside an annoying enigma, she impulsively said:

"Never mind! I like your face, for it seems that of an honest man. If I am mistaken—well, little harm can come of it! Now—will you listen to the story I brought you here to receive?"

"I'm wholly at your service, ma'am," bowed the detective.

"First, I am rich. I have more money than I well know how to spend. I can pay you almost any price you see fit to name. Now—will you serve my needs?"

"How can I, ma'am?"

"By aiding me to bring to justice one of the vilest wretches who ever cursed this fair earth! By helping me to run down—did you ever hear of a man named Murray Nash?"

Quickly, sharply came that query, and those great blue eyes seemed to be on fire as their owner leaned forward, gazing intently into the face of the man who had answered her mute summons.

But if she expected to startle Bob Breeze, Lady Venus was counting on entirely too much. Not a muscle of his face changed, and he calmly made reply:

"A man by the name of Murray Nash, you say? I knew of one man by that name, who left a red record behind him at Kansas City, yes."

"Where he murdered a rich stockman, after drugging and robbing him!" almost harshly exclaimed Lady Venus, her hands clinched, her jaws set, her face that of one fairly lusting for vengeance. "He is the man I mean! He is the demon I've sworn to hunt to the gallows! He is the criminal whom I beg you to join me in bringing to a long-cheated justice! Now—will you serve me in this?"

"I heard that Murray Nash had paid the penalty, ma'am. Rumor certainly sent him up a tree, at the end of a rope, out in Colorado."

"Rumor lied! Murray Nash is still living, still pursuing his career of crime, and—"

Lady Venus abruptly checked her passionate speech, leaning back in her chair, feverishly passing a lace-edged handkerchief across her face.

Bob Breeze remained silent, calmly yet respectfully watching his more than fair hostess.

If she was acting a part, then Lady Venus was something beyond the ordinary. If he had not pretty well concluded that she was connected closely with the rather rough experience he had met up with in the hills, Robert could easily have fancied her a deeply injured lady, who lived only for the purpose of avenging some terrible wrong inflicted upon her or hers, in the days gone by.

As it was, he showed little signs, but made up for that by keeping up a lively thinking.

"Where is the trap? It ought to show up pretty soon, now she's given me a fair smell at the rich bait. And—what is she to Murray Nash, or Murray Nash to her? There was a woman of some sort connected with that Kansas City case, but not this one; unless she can work a miracle in the way of altering face and figure, both!"

"Is it just a try to see if I am really the detective they charged me with being, yonder in the hills? If so, had I better stick to the tale I told then, or play another? That's the question!"

All this, and considerably more, Bob Breeze had time to think of during that brief pause, employed by Lady Venus in regaining her composure. But he had not fully decided upon his wisest course of action, when the lady spoke again, in calmer tones:

"To go back, Mr. Breeze: were you employed on that case?"

"The Kansas City affair, you mean, ma'am?"

"Yes. You were one of Pinkerton's men at that date, and I know that their Agency had charge of the case. So—were you one of the detectives set to work on that case?"

"I haven't admitted, yet, that I was ever a detective, ma'am."

"Why deny it?" with a touch of impatience in her voice, and in the vicious little stamp which one foot gave.

"I don't deny it, either," with a slight smile. "I admit that I was a Pinkerton man—at that date."

"And you were employed on the Murray Nash case?" she persisted.

"No, but I heard all about it, of course."

"There was a heavy reward offered for his capture; does that offer still stand? It has not been withdrawn?"

"Not to my knowledge, and if it had been, I reckon I would have come across the notice. It still stands good, I reckon. And there are at least three other rewards offered for the capture of Murray Nash; two of them read, dead or alive!"

"The demon!" flashed Lady Venus, her hands clinching anew, her red lips curling back until her pearly white teeth were visible for a second. "I'd joyfully double all those rewards, if I might only be brought face to face with Murray Nash, for one short half-hour!"

Bob Breeze gave a low, dry chuckle, at the same time shrugging his shoulders. And in still drier tones he said:

"If you're in dead earnest, ma'am, the man who could bring that meeting to pass, would make bigger wages than he could by finding a silver mine, ready opened and stocked! Double all the rewards? *Whew-ew!*"

"I mean it—every word of it!" impetuously cried Lady Venus, leaning forward in her chair with tightly clasped hands, her eyes all aglow as she added: "Will you earn that money, Robert Breeze?"

The detective's eyes opened widely, and a stare of almost stupid amazement marked his face. He seemed wholly taken aback by that swift question, and to have some difficulty in rallying sufficiently to say:

"Will I earn it, ma'am?"

"That's what I asked you; will you earn all that money, Robert Breeze?" sharply repeated Lady Venus.

"Don't I wish I could, though!" ejaculated the man, with a shrug of his shoulders, like one who feels the folly of such a wild hope.

"You can if you only will, sir!"

"Then be sure I will if I can! But—how can I?"

CHAPTER XXV.

LADY VENUS EXPLAINS.

ROBERT spoke as though he was thoroughly in earnest, and the touch of doubt which he threw into his tones, only made his acting seem more natural. Lady Venus gave a little laugh which sounded half-sob, clapping her plump hands together after a girlish fashion.

"Then you admit that you are a detective, after all, Mr. Breeze?"

"I'd claim to be even worse than that, ma'am, for as big wages," he said, smiling grimly. "And Murray Nash'll never know the difference if I can once get my grip fairly upon him. But—how can I?"

"If I show you how, and you succeed in arresting him, what disposition will you make of the demon?"

"First catch your hare!" murmured Robert, as though to himself, but the quick flush which leaped into the woman's face told how surely the application was made.

Her first impulse pointed toward anger, but she quickly rallied, and forcing a little laugh, she said:

"I keep forgetting that you are a machine, as well as a man, Mr. Breeze! I have brooded so long over my bitter wrongs, that it is difficult for me to remember that all the world else is not equally interested in bringing Murray Nash to punishment."

"A goodly share of them would be, if they could see even half a show to nailing—those rewards!"

"Yet you hesitate and seem to hang fire even when I'm offering you far better than half-show, Mr. Breeze!"

Bob Breeze gave an uneasy shuffle with his feet, shifting nervously on his seat, fumbling his hat with his hands, the perfect picture of embarrassment. Lady Venus was watching him closely, and Robert felt in honor bound to give her the best article he had at his command.

"We'll, ma'am, you see, things aren't always as they seem, on the outside," he said, nervously, like one treading on dangerous ground.

"I've heard of unlucky fellows who would like nothing better than to cut a dash at the head of the procession, but who had to skulk in the dust and shadows at the rear, lest they attract entirely too much notice for the good of their own health. And so—I'm one of 'em, worse luck!"

"You mean—I hardly understand what you do mean, sir."

"I wish I didn't, my own self!" with a half-smothered sigh, then adding, in brisker tones:

"But you started to tell me just why you got so mightily down on this Murray Nash, I believe, ma'am?"

Lady Venus bowed her head upon her joined palms for a brief space, seemingly struggling to collect her thoughts or recover her natural composure. Then, lifting her head, and gazing half-vacantly, as it seemed, upon the detective, she began as follows:

"Our parents died when we were little better than children, sister and I, but they left us enough to live upon in comfort, if no more. And then—to cut what might easily be made a long story, short—kind friends took an interest in seeing that we got on in the world when we grew older."

"We lived in Chicago, and when—when he first crossed our path, sister and I were running a very profitable millinery establishment."

"Never mind just how that acquaintance was formed. I was quite old enough to have known better, you would say, but—I loved him, almost from first sight! It fills my very soul with indignant shame to admit as much, but—I did love him, with all my heart!"

"If you ever met Murray Nash—"

"I never did, ma'am," negatived the detective, as Lady Venus seemed to linger in her speech, with a touch of inquiry in her voice.

"But you have seen his picture, of course? It was filed in all the rogues' galleries, after that Kansas City affair."

"Yes, I've seen his picture, ma'am, but—"

"Then you can give a guess as to why I was so easily captivated, for a handsomer man never drew breath than was Murray Nash, at that time. An arch-angel in face, an arch-demon in heart! May these hands assist in fitting the hangman's noose about his neck!"

Bob Breeze maintained silence. Were he to humor each outburst of real or admirably simulated passion, when would the end come? And that was what he felt most deeply interested in, possibly because he had not been able to even guess what that ending was to be.

"Something p'ison, if only to even up so much sweetness cast to waste!" he assured himself, all his senses upon the alert, despite his subdued manner.

Lady Venus quickly rallied, seeming to brush away all fierce emotion by a single sweep of that perfumed kerchief across her face. And then, in cold, even tones she resumed her narrative:

"It was the same old story. A silly, infatuated woman, a smooth-tongued scoundrel, a brief taste of paradise, then—hell!"

"I have often marveled since how I could have been so utterly befooled, and why the scales did not drop from my eyes long before the terrible truth forced itself upon my brain! But 'twas the devil's favorite at work, and his master saw that defeat should not come upon his favorite imp too quickly!

"Murray Nash wheedled a great deal of money out of me; far more than could justly be spared from the business. Never mind the excuses he offered for needing the cash: I fairly worshiped him, *then*, and if he had asked for my heart, I would have plucked it forth from my bosom and given it him, gladly!

"Then—barely two weeks ahead of the date set for our marriage—Murray Nash absconded, and with him went my sister! I could not believe it, at first. I *would* not believe it! How could I? That the man to whom I had given my whole soul was a thief and a liar, surely was bad enough, but that my sister—that *they* should have fled together, was the blow before which I fell, worse than one stricken with death!"

Her voice grew husky, and Lady Venus bowed her head once more. Her figure shivered convulsively, and muffled sobs came through the kerchief in which her face was buried.

Bob Breeze sat in silence, attempting no consolation. If this was genuine grief, words could avail nothing. If it was but part of a cunning scheme to entrap, or to still more thoroughly test his fidelity, he could hardly afford to lend his enemies any assistance, further than to patiently await the *denouement*.

Once again Lady Venus rallied, and Bob Breeze felt another touch of dubiety as he saw that actual tears were dimming the brilliancy of her glorious eyes. Could it be that he had been mistaken throughout? That this was a genuine appeal for assistance?

"It was rather more than three months before I could act for myself," the woman resumed, steadying her voice as by a strong effort of will. "Until then, my friends hardly dared hope for my life, for the doctor in charge declared that, even if my bodily strength should come back to me, my mind would always remain a wreck!"

"In that he was mistaken. Vengeance proved more potent than all his drugs. I vowed to live until I had punished Murray Nash, not only for my own wrongs, but for his turning my poor sister into a household traitor! And—before heaven! I'll make that vow good, even yet!"

"I'm sure, ma'am, I hope so," hesitated Bob Breeze, as Lady Venus came to a pause, her now glowing eyes fixed upon his face. "But—if *your* Murray Nash, was the Kansas City Murray Nash—"

"They were the same, but it was not until after that bloody murder that I learned the villain's real name; while befooling me, he passed under another, which—of course I'll tell you all, if so doing can be of any service to you in running the scoundrel down?"

"Well, hardly. It's the man you want, not the name, I take it."

"Just so! Now—let me finish, please. As I said, I recovered my strength, mental as well as bodily, and then there was but one course in life left open to me: vengeance on the dastardly traitor!"

"I disposed of everything, for I knew that money would be required. I employed a detective to trace my game, but all he did was to draw his pay regularly, and put me off with flimsy excuses. I was innocent, then, and I tried to possess my soul with patience."

"Then—Mabel came home—to die! Not until I heard her sad story—not until I saw her draw her last breath in my arms, her head resting upon my bosom—did I fully realize what a devil Murray Nash really was!"

"Never mind the story she told. Enough that, when the grave closed over her wasted form, I lived only for vengeance. And then, while waiting for a clew to be picked up by the detectives I employed, that Kansas City affair took place, and I knew my man for Murray Nash!"

"You know how long ago that occurred. Ever since I have been seeking my game, both through hired tools, and on my own hook. I knew that Murray Nash was a gambler, and in hopes of thus meeting him, I learned all the ins and outs of faro. I put aside all maidenly modesty, all womanly shame, living only for that one end: a meeting with the demon who had blasted two innocent lives for all time."

"As a man over whose head hung the hangman's noose, I felt pretty certain that Murray Nash would avoid large cities, and on that supposition I drifted West, finally fetching up here at Eureka. I firmly believe that fortune has grown weary of baffling me, and that my game is in or very near to this very town."

"Is that so?" ejaculated Bob Breeze, interestedly. "Then you've *really* struck a clew, ma'am?"

"I could almost make oath to that effect, sir. I firmly believe that the man once known as Murray Nash, is now chief of a gang of road-agents, with headquarters very close to Eureka. Of course I can't do the work myself, and I was thinking seriously of sending to Chicago for Pinkerton's Agency to send me out a good man. One would be sufficient, for I can readily hire

any amount of assistance here; all I lack is some one to take the lead, and act as brains."

Bob Breeze lowered his eyes, but said nothing. Though patient as a cat at a rat-hole when his game was afoot, he was longing for the end to come, now that he began to catch a glimpse of it.

Lady Venus frowned a bit as she watched his blank countenance, but after a brief silence she spoke again:

"I abandoned that idea, Mr. Breeze, when I saw *you* take place at my table. I recognized you at once, for I seldom forget a face once marked. I knew that you were once a detective, even if you were not one at present, and as a detective, I ventured to ask you to follow me here, where we might talk freely, without fear of being eavesdropped. If I have not thanked you for humoring me in what you must have thought a very odd, if not a shameful, whim, it's because I'm so full of this— Oh, sir, you *will* aid me in bringing Murray Nash to justice?"

Bob Breeze shifted uneasily on his seat, but kept silence, and Lady Venus impetuously broke out with a positive offer.

"If you are hanging back for something more definite, sir, how will this proposition suit you: I'll bind myself in terms of your own framing, to pay you five thousand dollars for the arrest of the chief of road-agents, and double that sum if he proves to be Murray Nash!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BOB BREEZE REJECTS A BRIBE.

LEANING forward in her chair, Lady Venus keenly watched the face of the man opposite, a half-smile coming to her red lips as she anticipated his amazement at such extraordinary liberality.

But the detective showed nothing of the sort. Hardly a muscle of his face altered, and that faint change was not due to surprise.

His eyes met hers with a dogged expression in them, and when he spoke, his words came firmly, if in subdued tones:

"I'd really like to jump at your grand offer, ma'am, but I just can't—just *can't* do it, ma'am!"

"Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, I couldn't tackle a gang—you said there *was* a gang, didn't you, ma'am?"

"There surely is such a band, yes! The robbers have left more than one black mark against themselves here in Eureka, and the one who was the main agent in breaking them up, as a band, could reign almost as a little god!"

"Until some one kicked the pedestal from under him—just so!" commented Breeze, with a short, dry chuckle.

"If you are a coward, your face tells lies! You can turn this trick if any one man can, and so—"

"And so—that fetches me back to the break, ma'am," cut in the man from Chicago, with a bow to soften the rudeness. "Being just one man, how could I hope to get away with a whole gang, such as you speak of, ma'am?"

"I'm amply able, even as I am willing, to pay for all the help you see fit to employ, Mr. Breeze," quickly answered Lady Venus. "Only say that you will take the contract, and I'll do the rest!"

Bob Breeze shook his head in negation.

"I just couldn't even think of it, ma'am! First, as I've told you. Secondly, I've hit a mighty hard streak of bad luck my own self, and I'd ought to have a fellow feeling for such gents, rather than be trying to run them in."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it's rather tough, talking right out before a lady, ma'am," hesitatingly said Breeze, his lids drooping, his fingers fumbling uneasily with the brim of his soft hat the while.

"Surely, sir, after what I've said and done, you are not afraid to talk plainly before me?"

"You're honest, ma'am, and your past record is clear as sunlight, even though you may be filling a position which—that is—"

"Even though I preside over a gambling-table; just so!"

"Well, you see, ma'am, luck turned against me, back in Chicago, and in trying to make it come my way again, I—I *got caught*!"

"Got caught?" echoed Lady Venus, both voice and face expressing surprise, mixed with a fair degree of bewilderment. "I don't understand you, Mr. Breeze! Surely you never—you didn't—"

"I didn't slit a throat, or crack a bank," muttered Breeze, with a touch of sullenness in his tones. "I just let a criminal slip through my fingers when the boss reckoned I'd ought to have held my grip. And so—well, I was railroaded!"

"Sent to prison, you mean?"

"Just that—no less! And so, don't you see, ma'am, I'm hardly in the fix to cut a splurge such as you hint at."

"Then you broke jail?"

"I served my time out, far as that goes, ma'am, but—well, the story is too long for telling now, and it wouldn't interest you if I did try it on. The blunt fact is this: I drifted out this way, simply because I couldn't live any longer about my old stamping grounds."

"For which I would be sorry enough, if it hadn't brought us in contact with each other," said Lady Venus, with one of her most bewitching smiles, as her plump hand went out for the shake which Bob Breeze meekly declined.

"I'm hardly fit for *that*, ma'am," he muttered, lowly. "And then, too, it'd feel like pledging myself to do your work, which I just can't take hold of—just *can't* ma'am!"

"You can and must, Robert Breeze!" impetuously cried the Gold Coin Venus, thoroughly in earnest now that she saw her hopes growing dim. "What matter your past record? Half the men out here are hiding a skeleton of some sort, and even if *you* have one, who will be any the wiser, without you voluntarily display it to their gaze?"

Bob Breeze said nothing in words, but his head gave a dogged shake.

Lady Venus sunk back in her chair, heaving a sigh of regret, but she quickly returned to the charge.

"Of course I can't *force* you to undertake the job, Mr. Breeze, but still you may be of great service to me, and at the same time benefit yourself. I'll pay you your own price if you can supply me with a clew to the location of this band of road-agents."

"I can't sell you what I haven't got, ma'am," doggedly muttered the man from Chicago. "Since I know nothing, it's just nothing I can tell or sell you, ma'am."

"But you can learn! You can pretend to be prospecting, and, surely, with your past experience in finding clews, you can find one here, without arousing suspicion as to your real object."

"I wouldn't know where to strike in, ma'am. I never even heard of such a gang until you named it, just back."

"But you know it now, and—you *will* try for the clew?"

"Can't do it, ma'am, and that's flat!" with a touch of impatience in his tones.

Lady Venus reached a hand under the edge of the table, opening a secret drawer, from which she extracted a handful of bank-notes, some of them of large denomination, as the detective's keen eyes readily saw.

She fluttered these over her lap, a winning smile coming into her face as her great eyes pleaded in unison with her mellow voice:

"See, Mr. Breeze! You can take your own price, just so you'll agree to help me bring Murray Nash to justice! And, as the surest method of bringing that about, find where this gang of road-agents make their headquarters while off the trail. You *can* do it if you *will*; now, say you will fall in with my wishes?"

"You're giving me a mighty rocky deal, Lady Venus," said Breeze, his voice showing a degree of emotion, probably caused by regret at having to reject such a liberal bribe.

"I'm making you the offer of your lifetime, sir!" sharply retorted the woman, her hand closing about the bills, making a crinkling sound as they folded together. "If you reject it—"

"Which I'll have to do," bowed the detective, coldly.

For a brief space there was silence between them. Lady Venus seemed trying to read what lay back of the dogged expression on his face. Bob Breeze avoided her eyes, but gazed at her perfect figure, like one who finds it no easy matter to hold his admiration in stern check.

A faint smile crept into the woman's face as she noticed that look, and her manner underwent an abrupt change. When she spoke again, her voice was soft, almost pleading:

"You are cruelly hard, Mr. Breeze, but I suppose I must submit. You—I can trust you not to repeat the story I have told you?"

"You can trust me so far, Lady Venus."

"And you'll never betray my secret? You'll never let drop even a hint through which Murray Nash could penetrate my present disguise?"

"He'll never be one whit the wiser through my telling, ma'am."

"Then—for your trouble in complying with this extraordinary whim of mine, dear sir," said Lady Venus, extending her plump hand, between the fingers of which fluttered several bank-notes.

Bob Breeze drew back with an energy which slid his chair over the carpet for a number of inches, and a hot flush leaped into his face as he motioned back her hand.

"It's hard to believe that you wish to insult me, Lady Venus, but—put up your money!"

"I merely wished to pay you for your trouble in coming here, sir."

"And I wish for no such reward, madam," coldly said the detective, rising to his feet. "Whatever I may be now, once I was a gentleman, and as such I obeyed your commands. Now—permit me to wish you a very good evening!"

Tossing the money on the table, Lady Venus sprung to her feet, her hands extended appealingly, a pained smile upon her face as she said:

"Pardon—pray, pardon me, Mr. Breeze! I never thought—I have grown so used to men who are willing to save any and all hurts with gold, that I really—"

"Say no more, Lady Venus. I wish I might

help you, but—my own life might easily pay the forfeit, were I to meddle with the job."

"Then—you are a member of that very band!" impulsively cried the Gold Coin Venus, as though a ray of clear light had suddenly penetrated the fog. "You surely *must* belong to it, Robert Breeze!"

"I surely do *not* belong to the gang, ma'am," coldly denied the man from Chicago. "Not that I claim too much honesty for such a membership, but—I never had such a chance to offer itself!"

There was a touch of raillery in his tones, but Lady Venus saw fit to accept his words at their face value, and she eagerly added:

"But you can—you will join this band of outlaws? And when you are once a member, you can give me the clew I need!"

"In other words, you wish me to join, simply to betray them to you, and through you to the law?" almost harshly demanded the detective. "You made a mistake in picking your tool, Lady Venus!"

"But—you *could* do it, without danger to yourself!"

"I might, but I certainly never will. I may have fallen to a low notch in the scale of honor, ma'am, but I never was such a cur as to sell out one who placed trust in me as a friend. Nor will I ever reach such a depth, while I own a gun to blow out my brains with!"

He partly turned toward the door, as though to take his departure before other words could be spoken, but Lady Venus was too quick. She caught his right hand between hers, gazing into his face with great eyes swimming in tender moisture, her voice almost caressing as she said:

"I honor you for those sentiments, dear sir, but—I could fairly worship the man who helped me to my vengeance!"

Bob Breeze bowed over her hands, and if his lips brushed those warm dimples, who can blame him? The only wonder is that he did not lift his lips higher!

"Will you be that man, Robert Breeze?" softly murmured the siren, her head lowering until her warm cheek touched his bowed head. "Serve me, and—ask what reward you will, 'tis yours—all yours!"

Her hands were dropped, and Breeze stepped nearer the door, saying:

"I could do much to earn such a glorious reward, Lady Venus, but—not so much! Now, may I bid you good evening, ma'am?"

Flushed and seemingly greatly abashed by this rebuff, Lady Venus unlocked the door, and Bob Breeze passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LADY VENUS AND THE SPORT.

AFTER the door had closed behind the man from Chicago, Lady Venus bent her head and listened intently, seemingly taking note of his footsteps in rapid retreat.

There was an expression upon her beautiful face just then, which would be difficult to describe; a peculiar mingling of doubt, fear, hope and admiration.

The faint sound of footsteps came from still nearer, but not until she could no longer hear aught of Bob Breeze, did the woman turn from the door, to confront the man who had entered that room, from one adjoining it.

Lady Venus showed no signs of surprise or indignation at this intrusion, but met his half-quizzical gaze with the crisp query:

"Well, are you satisfied now, Bailey Pemberton?"

The Gold Coin Sport laughed softly as he sunk into the comfortable chair recently occupied by the woman gambler, then retorted:

"Who was the first to doubt, Beauty?"

"Yes, but I doubt no longer, and this Bob Breeze is a recruit to be more than proud of! We owe Johnny Dogood one for that, old fellow, and you don't want to forget to let him know as much, either!"

Lady Venus took a seat, her face as animated as her words. Beyond all doubt she had been favorably impressed with the man from Chicago, and made no bones about admitting as much.

On the other hand, Bailey Pemberton seemed but ill at ease, frowning darkly as he tugged at his drooping mustache with a hand that was remarkably nervous for a man of his reputed nerve.

"I wish I could think just that way, Pretty, but—"

"What's to hinder, old grief on a monument?" mocked the woman, half-angrily, as she watched his darkening visage. "You were where you could hear every word, if not see every action. Didn't he show proof against every test? Didn't he—Why, man, dear! I gave him a fair chance at what hardly a citizen of Eureka but would have damned his very soul to win!"

"I know; I heard you come the love-lorn damsel," drawled the Gold Coin Sport, his lips curling, but surely not with jealousy. "Hit you tolerably hard, too, didn't it, my lady?"

"Only because I'm not used to that sort," Lady Venus said, with a low, careless laugh. "As a rule, I have to put up the bars, not buck

against them, as now. Well, you heard, if you didn't see; and still you doubt whether Robert is an honest brother?"

"I wish I knew!" with that uneasy frown returning to his face.

"Well, I've done my level best to settle all doubts, and I have succeeded very well in my own case. I felt almost certain that Robert was still in harness, and that he had pulled the wool over Johnny Nogood's eyes, in hopes of bagging the entire family. Now—I've tested him in every way I could think of, and he's come out, fire-proof. What more can you ask, Bailey?"

"As I told you before, I only wish I knew! He seemed like the pure quill, but something warns me he's bad medicine! I'd give a solid week's clean-up at your table, Sweetness, if he'd held off coming to this part of the globe for another week or two!"

"Then you actually hold to it that he's after the gang, Bailey?"

"I don't say *that much*, Venus, for I can't prove it. But I *do* say that I feel he'll fetch us bad luck by the dead loads!"

Lady Venus gazed steadily into that gloomy visage for a space in silence, then a mellow laugh parted her red lips, to be followed by the half-mocking speech:

"Well, what is to be, will be, old man! And if he's a bearer of bad luck, Bobby o' the Breeze wants to get down to business in a holy hurry, or his budget will be wasted, for us! Nearly time for the big coup, isn't it, Bailey?"

"Nearly time, yes."

"And everything is working smoothly? Never a hitch that hasn't been foreseen and provided for?"

"Couldn't be better, and yet—curse the fellow!" with a sudden outburst of fierce anger against the absent.

"Curses go, since your taste runs that way, old bear," laughingly assented the woman gambler, but plainly without sharing his almost superstitious uneasiness. "For my part, I felt far more like hugging the dandy duck—I just *did*, for a scandalous fact, Bailey!"

"I'm not doubting that, Venus. It's a way you've got of your own. But this Breezy Bob as he calls himself, hardly appeared to appreciate your melting charms at their full value, it seemed to me!"

"Which is why I agreed to your curses, big boy," mocked the woman, carelessly. "If he had come down in answer to my hot shot—well, I'm not so mighty sure I wouldn't have thrown both you and your big game to the winds!"

"All for love, and the world well lost, eh?"

Something in the words, or the tone in which they were drawlingly uttered, seemed to sting Lady Venus sharply. Her face flushed, her eyes caught a fiery glitter, and there was an unusual sharpness in her tones as she exclaimed:

"What do you know about love, man? Nothing—just nothing at all! And so—drop that point, for something you *do* comprehend; when is this little trick to be turned?"

"To-morrow night, if all things move along as smoothly as they are going up to date. Then—chaos!"

Lady Venus laughed merrily, her fair face the picture of amusement.

"In other words, Eureka will fancy she has turned to a volcano, and bound to give the exhibition of her life! Isn't that just about the size of it, Bailey, old man?"

"Just about," with a grim nod. "There'll be an eruption worthy a prominent place in history, never you doubt it, old lady!"

"You haven't placed too great trust in any of the lads, Bailey? If any one of them should prove false, his peaching couldn't ruin all?"

"No, nor could the blowing of the entire gang do that much harm," came the quick response.

"Don't take me for a fool, Venus, whatever else you do. This is my master-stroke, and when it comes off, a complete success, as I'm sure it will, I'll have enough to back me up in an honest life for the remainder of my days!"

"In company with—What is your pet name for the little strawberry blonde, Bailey?"

A hot flush shot into that dark face, and Lady Venus gave a low, half-malicious laugh as she caught his startled look.

"I don't—What're you trying to get through you, girl?" harshly growled the Gold Coin Sport, trying to cover his confusion with an assumption of indignation.

"Well, Bailey, there never yet was a man smart enough to stock the cards on me without my catching a fair glance at his hand before the betting ran dry. You're a smart player, but—I'm another!"

"What do you mean, anyway?"

"That it isn't altogether booty you're playing this heavy game for, my dear fellow. Now, cross your heart, if it is?"

Pemberton was in no great haste to answer, and his dark eyes tried their level best to read what might lie back of that smiling face. Was it angry jealousy, or, what was it?

"Of course you wouldn't lie to me about it, Bailey," the Gold Coin Venus pursued, with mock earnestness. "How could you? How many times do you reckon you've rolled your glorious eyes heavenward while, with hand over heart,

you've made oath that this world held only one woman, for you?"

"Oh, come off! You're not jealous, so why try to make me think you are? Don't I know—Didn't you come as near slobbering all over Bob Breeze a bit ago, as he'd let you? And did I kick at that caper?"

Lady Venus arched her brows high, her face the picture of innocent amazement as her lips shaped the words:

"How could you, Bailey? Wasn't it just in the line of business, and all on your sweet account, man, dear?"

"In one word, then, do you mean to say that you are growing jealous of—of any particular person?" almost harshly demanded the sport.

"In one word, then, never a bit of it, old fellow!" retorted Lady Venus, with a low, merry laugh. "And, as first proof, let's you and I drink to Miss Myrtle Umfreville as is, Mrs. Bailey Pemberton that is to be!"

Springing to her feet, Lady Venus passed into the chamber where the Gold Coin Sport had lain in wait during her interview with Bob Breeze, shortly after returning with a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses. Opening the one and filling the others, she resumed her seat, lifting the sparkling liquor between eye and light, to utter:

"Good luck to your newest scheme, old friend! Good luck to the girl you wish to change into a wife! Good luck to us all! Drink hearty!"

The combination toast was duly honored by both, and as he placed his glass upon the table, Bailey Pemberton seemed a little more at his ease, though still betraying certain signs of dubiety in face and voice.

"Then, you don't really object, old lady?"

"To adding beauty to booty, old gentleman? Never a bit of it, my dear fellow! Only—"

"There is an only, then? I reckoned as much!" with a frown.

"Only, why didn't you confide in me, outright, Bailey?" asked Lady Venus, in grave tones, but with an odd sparkle in her big eyes.

"Well, I hardly knew whether I could—whether I really cared to add such a trick to the big eruption, you see," muttered the sport, in an embarrassed tone. "And then—how could I know but what you'd cut up rusty at the bare idea?"

"Did you really think I'd try to hold fast a man who tried to break away, Bailey Pemberton? Is that the way you've figured me up?"

"Well, I didn't know. Of course I knew you had grown tired of me, long since, but—confound it, girl! why push me to the wall? How did you find it out, anyway?"

"By my learning, of course," with a return to her former carelessness. "As I said, no man living can stock the cards on me without my tumbling to his little scheme. And now—just what do you intend doing with this girl, Pemberton? It isn't *all* dirt you're thinking of playing her, I hope?"

"No, as Heaven hears me! I'm in earnest—so much in earnest that, rather than lose the chance of making Myrtle Umfreville my wife, I'd let all the rest of the big game go slide! Now—make the most of it, Lady Venus!"

"Then nothing I might say would change your plans, Bailey?"

"Nothing you might say, or do, for that matter. I mean to carry her off to-morrow night, and make her my lawful wife, out of hand."

"Good luck go with you both, then! And, old pal, since this is your little game, you'll hardly have the cheek to deny me the same privilege, will you?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FACING THEIR CARDS.

FOR the second time since that interview began, the Gold Coin Sport gave a start of thorough amazement. And once more Lady Venus laughed softly as she watched his startled expression.

"If sauce for the gander, why not for the goose, cully?" she drawled, in a half-malicious tone, clearly enjoying her little surprise. "Not very poetical title, I admit, but don't you think they are perfectly suitable, Bailey?"

"You mean—It's not that infernal Bob Breeze, surely?"

"Well, hardly!" with another amused laugh, but with the color growing in her fair face before that keen gaze. "You say that the big eruption will come off to-morrow night, Bailey?"

"Unless something else turns up, yes. But—who is it, then, girl? You surely must be joking when you hint—"

"No more than you were joking when you declared that you meant to carry off Myrtle Umfreville to make her your wife, Bailey."

"But you're a woman, and—"

"Haven't I played my part equal to any man, sir? Have you ever had occasion to find fault with any weakness on my part?"

"Never, until now."

"Why now, then?"

"Because you have no right to let any crazy fancy play thunder with the game I've taken so much pains to set afoot. Because I'll not consent to your disarranging those plans at this late hour!"

"Stick a pin right there, if you please, Bailey Pemberton," sharply, yet coldly uttered Lady Venus, leaning forward until her elbows rested upon the table which stood between them. "I reckon it's high time you and I were coming to a final understanding, so—face your cards, and I'll face mine!"

"You've faced them for me, old lady," muttered the sport forcing a faint smile as their eyes met. "Board yours, please!"

"All right: I meant to do so, even if you hadn't given me a chance to expose your hand first. Now—I claim Alick McGregor as my particular prize in this game of ours!"

"The Express agent?" ejaculated Pemberton, in undisguised surprise.

"The Express agent, yes. His office is to be included in the raid, of course. Well, what's to hinder my adding him to the plunder?"

"Nothing, so far as I can see, but—what do you expect to do with the fellow, once you have bagged him?"

"What do you expect to do with the girl, once you've bagged her?"

"That's entirely different!" frowningly said the sport, giving an impatient gesture as he added: "She's a girl, and can be brought to hear reason, while he's a man—"

"And I'm heartily glad of it, too!" Lady Venus interrupted, with a mellow laugh, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling. "If he wasn't a man, do you reckon I'd bother my brain with thinking twice of him?"

Then her manner underwent a rapid change. Her levity vanished, to be replaced by earnest gravity. She looked the puzzled gambler squarely in the eyes as she spoke again:

"Are you so blind that you can't see how neatly this little whim of mine fits into your own pet scheme, Bailey Pemberton? Do you pretend to be in love with this girl sufficiently to take the long chances of carrying her off by force, yet are ignorant of the fact that she and Alick McGregor are lovers?"

"I know that he's been dangling around her, but, old Sprague would never hear to such a match!"

"No more than he would with you—just so! He's saving her up for his young hopeful; and Gilbert—well, you have seen how easily I can wind him around my little finger."

"I know. You wheedled the combination out of the idiot, like a charm!"

"And I made other coups, too, of which I said nothing, until, now. So, you see, my good fellow, our two tricks will fit in in to perfection, and if we can't come off winners by playing one lover against the other, call me no woman!"

Pemberton's face began to light up anew as he caught at her thinly veiled meaning, and from frowning he took to smiling. Yet, being a man, with all a man's little weaknesses, he felt a bit provoked to see how willingly Lady Venus was resigning all claims upon him.

"Then you really don't object to my carrying her off, Venus?"

"Never a bit of it, cully! And you? I'm to have the same privilege?"

"You really wish for it that way, then?"

"So very much so that rather than slip up on it, Bailey, I'd not only blow the gaff, but I'd give Robert Breeze a friendly hint as to where he had best take a look for—"

"No names!" sharply interrupted the Gold Coin Sport, his dark face turning several shades paler. "Don't make me your bitter enemy, old girl, or you may come off all the worse for it!"

"Which I wouldn't do for a fortune, cully! I simply tried to make you realize how much I'm in earnest about this bit of business. And now—it's all serene, partner?"

"All serene, so far as I'm concerned. And you, Pretty? You are quite sure you hold no grudge against me?"

Pemberton put that question earnestly, gazing keenly into her face the while. Despite all that had been said, he could not believe that Lady Venus was resigning her claims so easily. He would hardly have been a man if he had!

"Never a bit of it, Bailey," as she extended a hand, which he clasped after a barely perceptible hesitation. "I never liked you better than I do at this very moment, old boy!"

"Yet—you are giving me up to another woman!"

"Are you growling at that, Bailey?"

"No, but—"

He flushed hotly at her amused laugh, for he could not help reading her meaning aright. Then their hands closed together, and the little cloud fled, never more to return.

"I was a fool, girl, but you've effected a cure," he frankly admitted. "It stung a bit, to think how ready you was to throw me over, but I wouldn't have it different, if I could. We've been rare good friends in the past, and—"

"We'll be still better friends in the future, cully! I'll help you win a bride, and you'll assist me in catching a husband! Sounds funny, doesn't it, though?"

"Yes, but—if we can fetch it around!"

"We will it that way, and when two heads like ours come together, Bailey, all's over but counting up our winnings. Now—this Bob Breeze: I really believe he is true-blue, for he stood out against temptations weighty enough to sap

the fidelity of ninety-nine men out of every hundred. Still, you needn't trust him too far, or too wholly."

"Be sure I'll not!" with a touch of his former superstitious gloom in face and in voice. "I've never been entirely at ease in my mind since Johnny Dogood first fetched the fellow into the circle. I've wished a thousand times that I'd given Johnny a fresh cartridge to practice on, that time!"

"Well, I don't know. Perhaps 'twould have been the wisest, in the end, and then again it might have proven fatal to more than the man from Chicago!"

"You mean?"

"Just what I argued at the time. If Robert was still a Pinkerton man, and had come here on business, what would follow his fading away? An investigation, such as only the old Scotchman's boys know how to set afoot! And, you know, they generally get whatever they go for, too!"

"I know it. And that was the main reason why I took so much pains to get at the bottom facts. If I had known he was nothing more than he claimed, I'd have made quick work with the rascal, and he'd be food for worms before this! But now—curse him! I can't get this uneasy fancy out of my brain, try as I may."

"Then I wouldn't try any longer, for the present," coolly retorted Lady Venus. "Just let him do his share of the work, without giving him long enough warning to play any tricks, if such be in his mind. Then, when the eruption is fairly over, what more easy than to silence him?"

"By death, do you mean?"

"If nothing less will satisfy you, death let it be," smothering a yawn with her dimpled hand, as coolly as though speaking of a noxious insect, rather than of a human being. "Now—I'm growing sleepy, old fellow, and I really reckon I'll have to turn you out, for the night."

"All right," said Pemberton, rising to his feet. "You'll be ready to play your part, tomorrow evening?"

"Of course I will. Now, I'll douse the glim, in case our friend Bob Breeze is inquisitive enough to play the spy over this ranch. Step light as you go, and turn to the right, so as to keep in the shadow. Now—good-night, cully!"

Their hands came together as the light went out, and then, as Lady Venus opened the door, Bailey Pemberton slipped through the aperture, following her wise instructions to the very letter.

He could see or hear nothing which indicated espial, and as he left the building further behind him, the Gold Coin Sport sunk into a deep reverie, which was unbroken until, with growling cries of hatred, two dark shapes sprung from ambush upon him, striking as they came!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A BRIEF PASSAGE AT ARMS.

WITHOUT a preliminary sound to betray their purpose, the two thugs broke cover, leaping upon the Gold Coin Sport, one of them growlingly crying as his hand was poised for a blow:

"Down him—for keeps, pard!"

Almost instinctively that voice gave Bailey Pemberton a half-turn, bringing him face to face with the speaker, and thus laying him still more open to the trap which had been set for him.

With only his rear to face, the second thug leaped forward, his right arm curving around to circle Pemberton's throat, where his left hand locked with his other wrist, forming the garrote.

The assaulted man attempted to utter a shout of defiance as he jerked forth a weapon, but the bony forearm closed across his throat, not only checking utterance, but shutting off breath as well. A knee bored into the small of his back, pushing forward even as those arms jerked backward, both combining to deprive him almost entirely of his bodily strength, while a hot, whisky-laden breath rushed past his cheek as the garroter savagely growled:

"Look out fer his gun! Rip 'im wide open, cully!"

For probably the first time in his life as a sport, Bailey Pemberton found himself unable to make use of the gun his swift fingers had instinctively whipped forth from its customary resting-place. That suffocating pressure across his throat, combined with the boring knee at his spine, seemed to fairly paralyze his body, and the pistol fell from his nerveless fingers before they could contract sufficiently to lift and let fall the hammer.

"Stiddy him, then, cuss ye!" snarlingly cried the second thug, his knife glittering in the moonlight. "Stiddy—an' I'll fix 'im!"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't, now!" rung forth a clear, taunting voice, as its owner came with a rush. "Take a tumble to yourself, Johnny!"

With a spat like a heavy rock falling from a height on wet sand, a tightly clinched fist struck the knave of the knife squarely on the left jaw, lifting his feet clear of the ground, sending him endlong, half a dozen feet away. His bared blade whirled through the air, to drop at a safe enough distance, but the breezy

new-comer never gave a second thought to either man or weapon, just then.

"A hug, is it? Come to my arms, Johnny, for—"

Without breaking the rush before which the knifer had taken a tumble, the new-comer swung for the other knave—and caught him!

With a vicious oath the garroter broke hold on the Gold Coin Sport with one hand, reaching for his knife, but before he could fairly draw the weapon, he saw that he must do more if he hoped to save himself from that human catapult. Then—the two strong men closed in a grapple which might easily mean death to one or both.

Bailey Pemberton, weakened by that terrible pressure on those two nerve-centers, sunk limply to the ground, gasping for breath, yet even then trying to give the signal "thumbs down!" There was a fast and furious twisting and twining of limbs, a rocking to and fro of bodies, a coming of hot, hard breaths, then—one of those gladiators lost his footing, to be whirled through the air in a cross-buttock, striking the hard ground on his head and shoulders with a shock sufficiently heavy to have crippled the average man.

"All down but one, and that's your Uncle Fuller!" breezily cried the victor, paying no attention to the fallen thugs, even though the one who had dropped before his fist was already rising to his feet with a dizzy, drunken-like movement. "How goes it, pardner? Nothing worse than losing the starch out of your legs, I reckon?"

"Stop—down 'em!" gasped the Gold Coin Sport, fumbling for a weapon with his half-benumbed right hand. "Don't let— Halt!"

"Skin out, ye critters!" amended the victor, sending a light, reckless laugh after the discomfited thugs, both of whom were scrambling away under the moonlight, instinctively heading for the nearest patch of darkness. "Hawks don't prey on buzzards—when they can get anything more delicate, that is! Now—I'm Breezy Bob, who're you?"

Bailey Pemberton was struggling to his feet, his powers returning now that the garroter's hold no longer paralyzed him. Bob Breeze lent him a helping hand, yet at the same time a restraining one.

If nothing else, he saved the thugs having to dodge a random shot or two, and the Gold Coin Sport broke forth angrily:

"Stop them! Down them, you— Don't let 'em get clean off, I say!"

"Meaning those two gentlemen who are doing their level best to split each the biggest hole through the atmosphere, cully?"

"Let me— Hands off, confound you, fellow!"

"That's all right, old man, but if I had kept hands off a bit ago, what do you reckon would be the condition of your pelt, just about this time o' day?"

"I know, but—why let those devils win clear?"

Breezy Bob gave a low chuckle at this. He released the gambler, for by this time the thugs were well out of sight and hearing. And with a real or admirably counterfeited hesitation, he made reply:

"You'll not—if I answer that honestly, cully, you'll keep hands off? You'll not let your angry passions bubble up to an overflow?"

"I don't understand! Who are you, anyway?"

"Breezy Bob, and I used to live in Chicago, until that village grew all too small for my enterprise. Then—I drifted toward the setting sun, looking for the pot of gold at the rainbow's end! I haven't found it—yet! I haven't found much of anything else that's worth mentioning, either, though I'm living in hopes—living in hopes that— By the way, colonel, did we shake?"

Without waiting for a reply, Bob Breeze caught a hand, giving it the first grip of the gang while shaking it cordially. There was no return signal, and their fingers dropped apart, Pemberton saying:

"Of course I'm grateful, sir. They caught me foul, and I hadn't a show for my money, until you chipped. But—why did you let 'em go?"

"You'll not jump me, in turn, if I tell you just why, cully?" asked the man from Chicago, with another of his dry chuckles.

"No. You saved more than my purse, I reckon, from the words those devils let drop as they bounced me."

"Well, boss, to tell the truth and shame the— never-mention-him-to-ears-polite—I had an eye on you, with pretty much the same sort of intentions! And so—it made me hot under the collar to see them going for my pudding, so I just went for them! Such infernal impudence! Just as though— I say, boss?" his voice taking on a coaxing, wheedling cadence.

"Say it then!"

"I reckon them galoots really 'lowed to lay you out for the coroner, and so—don't you reckon my work is worth a couple or two ducats? I wouldn't lie to a gentleman of your caliber, and say that I haven't had a bite or sup for three days! because it's been considerably nearer a week!"

"Who are you, my good man?" asked the Gold Coin Sport, his hand slipping into a pocket, his voice betraying something like sympathy.

"Bob Breeze, your honor, and—good luck go with you, cully!" he cried, like one overjoyed, as Pemberton slipped a wad of bank-notes into his by no means reluctant fingers. "Lord above, look down in love! If I don't get howling drunk, general, drinking your awful good health, then it'll be because there's an unsuspected leak somewhere under my alcohol tank! And if you don't—"

"My name's Bailey Pemberton, and I run the Gold Coin shebang, Mr. Breeze," cut in the gambler, as though tired of waiting for that nimble tongue to run down of its own accord. "If you'll drop around there on the morrow, and can show me how I can lend you a lift, it'll be doing me a bigger favor than anything else I can think of, just now. You will come?"

"Won't I, though? Why, boss, a small-pox flag over your front door couldn't even begin to scare me away, and if I'm proud of anything under the stars, it's my beauty of face! Don't laugh! I can't help it, for I was born just that way!"

"Laugh? At you? After you've saved my life? That isn't the way I was built, dear sir!" earnestly spoke Pemberton, catching the breezy fellow by a hand and shaking it warmly: but without adding a grip for which Robert waited!

"Never mention it, boss! It cost me nothing, and gave me a heap o' fun, not to mention the ducats which— I'll think of your honor while putting 'em to soak, general!"

"And you'll surely drop in at the Gold Coin?"

"I surely will! Now—hadn't I better act as convoy, general? If those pesky galoots should take a notion to jump you again!"

"They'll jump clean over the range, then!" with grim decision. "I have my eyes open now, and they'll never catch me a second time. Don't forget to call, please! Good-night, and good luck!"

"The same to you, in triple measure, general!"

The two men parted, Pemberton heading for his saloon, Bob Breeze making his way back to the Empire House, far from discontented with his evening's work, even though all things had not panned out precisely as he would like to have them.

He did not waste much time lingering in the office and bar combined, but as soon as he could do so, without leaving behind him an impression of unusual haste, he climbed the stairs and sought his chamber.

Locking the door securely, Robert Breeze began removing his garments, like one whose most earnest thoughts are bent on obtaining a good, long night's sleep. But, far from that being the case, he was never more fully awake in all his life.

He extinguished the light and lay down upon his bed, not to sleep, but to think; and, one by one he revolved in his brain the events which had transpired since his entering Eureka City.

"Johnny was 'way off in his guess as to old Sprague, if he really reckoned he was boss," a portion of his thoughts ran. "Maybe he's part of the mix, but he's not the biggest toad, by a heap!"

"Lady Venus? Sure! Glory to Thespis! what an actress she would be for the burlesque stage! And—wouldn't the stage-lover have a picnic, if she played before a crowd, as she did before an audience of one, this night! I wonder— Easy, Robert! Don't turn silly in your old age, or I'll turn you off as superannuated!"

"Is she, and the lieutenant, and the veiled pilgrim, one and undivided? Yes, for rocks! And, if so, isn't Bailey Pemberton the chief? Yes, with even louder emphasis! Then—why that invitation to follow? Not simply to practice her big eyes, and white hands, and mellow tones, and red-ripe lips on the waif from Windy City? She never gave a thought to Robert Breeze the man, but confined them to Robert Breeze, the detective!"

"Then—the sport! If he really is the chief, why didn't he give me the return grip? Can he still suspect that I'm other than I seem? It surely looks that way, but—I'll fool 'em all, even yet!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FIRST TRICK TURNED.

THE stage did not reach Eureka City until shortly after sunset, and as the Express of Wells, Fargo & Co. did a flourishing business, the agent was obliged to return to his office after supper, to "clear decks" for the day to come.

All Eureka City was aware of this fact, and hardly any one would have thought it at all strange to see a light in that office well along into the night.

Alick McGregor, on the evening following the one which took Bob Breeze from the Gold Coin to trail a Venus, finished his business at an hour rather earlier than usual, however, and was just in the act of locking up, when a well-dressed individual came hurrying up, to quickly ask the question:

"This is the Express Office? You are the agent, are you not?"

"Yes, sir, to both questions," promptly replied McGregor, looking at the other with quickened interest.

So far as he could tell by that indistinct light, the gentleman was a complete stranger, but he was granted scant time in which to make his examination, for the gentleman hastily added:

"Good! I'm in luck, then! I have a valuable package which—"

"I'll open up at seven, in the morning, sir."

"But—can't you oblige me now, my dear sir?" moving a little nearer, to add in lower tones, full of earnestness: "I really don't like to keep so much money on my person, sir, or in the hotel safe. It would be a favor—a great favor, indeed! Four thousand—to deposit until to-morrow, when I wish to ship it by Express. You'll surely oblige me, so far, sir?"

"You are a stranger in town, I reckon?"

"Yes, sir. I came in on the stage this evening. I was too late for banking hours, of course, but I heard that you did not close until much later, and I thought—I do not mind paying for the accommodation, if you will only—"

"Would you accept pay for doing a favor, sir?" a little sharply interrupted McGregor, at the same time producing his keys.

"No, but— Pardon, sir, if I gave offense, but I really—"

"Come in. I'll have a light in a moment," curtly spoke the agent, as he swung the door open and crossed the threshold.

The stranger followed him closely, and was standing by the counter when McGregor produced a light. In his hands was a neatly squared packet, and as Alick turned that way, he began untying the cord which surrounded the package.

"I'll just run over the bills with you, sir, that you may—"

"Being after office hours, sir, I can only accept this package as a temporary trust, not as a regular deposit. I'll put it in the safe for you, and return it at call on the morrow. If that is not satisfactory, then I must decline to touch it at all."

"That will be quite sufficient, my dear sir!" pushing the package across the counter. "My name is written on the outside. I'll mention it when I call, as proof that I'm myself," he added, with a low, amused laugh.

Alick McGregor took the parcel, and turned away to the huge safe in which valuable packages were stowed until delivered to the owners, or started on their journey by stage.

His bowed form masked the combination-lock from the stranger's eyes while his trained fingers were manipulating it, but that precaution seemed entirely needless. Leaning carelessly against the counter, the stranger was lighting a cigar.

When the faint click denoted the falling bolt, and the heavy door was swung open, he made an abrupt change, however. His right hand flew up, and as though this gesture formed the signal for which they had been waiting, two masked figures leaped over the counter, to which they had noiselessly crept.

McGregor sprang erect as his ears caught the sound of striking feet, and he instinctively sought to swing the safe-door shut; but in vain! A heavy blanket fell over his person, and powerful arms flung him to the floor, before he could offer resistance.

"Sure work, but careful!" warningly ordered the stranger, in sharp but guarded tones, at the same time turning the light a bit lower.

McGregor did all he could to break away, but those heavy folds were smothering him, and arms like bands of steel were holding him powerless.

"Search him for weapons, first!" warned the leader of the robbers, coming back from the front door, having made sure the heavy shade was thoroughly drawn. "He'll shoot, if he gets half a chance, and we don't want any of the citizens poking their noses in here now."

Removing the revolver which they found, the two men were not long in perfecting their capture. A brawny hand slipped inside that muffler, to close upon McGregor's throat, thus making sure no cry for help could be given while the prepared gag was being forced between his teeth.

After that, the rest was easy enough. Alick was bound, hand and foot, with strong cords, then lifted aside clear of the safe-front.

The leader bent lowly over him, and with lips close to his ear, softly whispered:

"Don't be an idiot, dear boy! I'll guard your life, even as I would my own, if you'll only listen to reason!"

McGregor gave as much of a start as his bonds would permit, and stared open-eyed at that figure, now turning away to where the men were already inspecting the contents of the safe.

Surely he had heard those tones before? Surely—

"Lady Venus, or I'm going crazy!" he mentally ejaculated, that discovery weakening him for the moment, even more completely than had the bonds so deftly applied.

"Hold the sack, Jack, and you—pass out the packages!" whispered Lady Venus—for she it

was, in masculine disguise. "Work lively, now, but make a clean sweep while you're about it. I've got the loose change, safe enough!"

She rapidly but thoroughly examined each parcel as it was passed to her, electing or rejecting without an instant's unnecessary delay, only giving over when the huge safe was swept clean, and the looting was complete.

"Mighty well wu'th the resk, too, I do reckon, boss!" chuckled Jack, as he lifted the bag as though to add its weight to the mental calculation already made of its value.

"Button! I'll do the talking for all," sharply reproved the Gold Coin Venus, swinging the heavy door shut, now that nothing further of value remained to tempt them. "You take a look around for stray bullion, Jack, while Billy helps me with the sport."

Giving her chosen helper a nod by way of instruction, Lady Venus stooped to lock her hands beneath Alick McGregor's shoulders. Between them they lifted the helpless agent, bearing him through the building to the rear, where a closed door was quickly opened, giving them exit upon a bare, desolate seeming patch of vacant ground.

"Bring up the horse, Billy," muttered the woman, as their living burden was lowered to the ground. "Lively, now! The boss may give the signal at any moment, and we don't want to be behind time with our part of the eruption."

Her orders were promptly obeyed, and when the animal came, Lady Venus cut the bonds that secured Alick McGregor's ankles, then assisted the rough in lifting the agent into the saddle with which the horse was provided. Once balanced therein, despite his stubborn efforts to fling himself off, Alick was quickly bound in place, a rope around his middle being fastened to both pommel and cantle, while another bond joined his feet by passing under the horse's belly.

"Stay by him Billy!" whispered Lady Venus, when these arrangements were fairly made. "If a row breaks forth, jump up behind and ride for dear life! Shoot your way through, if any one tries to check you, and make for the den, hot-foot! But—lose him, and you lose your own life just as surely! Don't forget that point, cully!"

"Bet your sweet life I won't fergit it, nuther!" Lady Venus hurriedly made her way back to the office, where she found her other ally, just completing his vain search.

"Never a find kin I find, boss!" was his disgusted report.

"That's all right, Jack. We've got the cream, already. Take the sack out and stow it safely. Have the horses ready, for the signal may come at almost any moment, now!"

Jack swung the well-laden sack upon his shoulder, and hurried out at the rear door.

Lady Venus bore him company as far as the exit, where she picked up certain articles which lay in the dense shadow close to the rear wall of the building. With these in hand she retraced her steps, moving briskly in that dim light, completing her arrangements for doing her share in "the eruption" of which mention has so often been made.

This completed, she passed out at the rear of the building, relieving Jack of the horses which he had just brought up. She quickly told him of the arrangements she had made, and to make sure there would be no mistake, she entered the building with him.

She had hardly done this, when there came a peculiar scratching sound at the front door, to which she replied with a faint whistle.

"Ready, Jack! mark two minutes by your watch, then touch her off! Come out as soon as you fire the match. We'll be waiting for you!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

OPENING A BANK.

ANOTHER enterprise, under the immediate direction of the road-agent chief, was being carried on that same night, the starting point being a building standing only a few yards from the side of that in which Hawley Sprague had his bank.

The chief, in the guise of a Mexican *vaquero* of the higher class, entered this second building, there to find three men in waiting for his coming.

Before speaking a word, the chief extended his right hand for the secret grip, and as this was given correctly, he gazed keenly into the face of each man in turn, like one who means to leave nothing to chance.

"All right, brothers," he said, in cheerful but guarded tones. "It's just possible that some of you have been thinking it's long and hard work for precious small pay, but, the harvest moon has come, and our reward comes with it! All ready, now?"

"All ready, boss!"

"You've got the tools, then?"

"They're in the hole, handy, boss."

"Good as old wheat! Come, then, and we'll get down to solid business without losing any more time."

The chief passed from the room, which was but dimly lighted, into a narrow closet which was not lighted at all. Here he guided himself by the sense of touch, descending a sharp slope,

and crouching low as he made his way through a narrow tunnel.

Presently he came to a halt, with his back against the cool earth, waiting until he counted three human beings who passed by him in the utter darkness.

Then he said, in guarded tones:

"Wait until I drop the blanket, lads, for there's no need of taking any odd chances. Now—strike a light, Pierson."

With that word the glow of a bull's-eye lantern made their surroundings visible, and without waiting for further instructions, two of the men caught up their tools, which stood just where work had been quitted earlier that evening.

The tunnel had been driven from one building directly beneath the other, and now the light showed the burglars a corner of the flooring of Sprague's Bank.

"Pry up a couple of boards, boys," said their chief, coolly. "Don't make any bigger racket than you have to, though I reckon no one would take notice even if they did catch the sounds. This isn't like it would be in a big city, of course, and pretty much everything goes, out here! Now, open her up, lads!"

It was a comparatively easy task, since the tunnel had been expanded sufficiently to give the men play for their arms and their tools, and in five minutes more the flooring had been broken sufficiently to permit the ready passage of a man.

The chief was first man through the aperture, the others waiting for his signal that the coast was clear and all was well. That came after a very brief delay. Although situated in a building so easily forced, the bank was never guarded by night. The big "burglar-proof" safes in the heavily cemented vault being considered impregnable.

Before calling his men, the chief made sure the shades were tightly drawn at the windows facing upon the street, then he struck a match and lit one of the oil lamps in use for night-work at the bank.

Under his supervision, it took but a few minutes in which to open the door leading into the vault, and then, with one of the men holding the bull's-eye so as to cast the bright glow directly upon the combination, the chief fell to work at the inner safe.

From the manner in which he got down to business, it was clear that he held the secret word on which that combination was set, but even if such had not been the case, the job would have been but an ordinary one for practiced cracksmen.

There was no time lock arrangement to bid them defiance, and once inside the vault itself, ignorance of the combination would not long have constituted a barrier. Still, an explosion might have awakened unwelcome curiosity too soon, and the chief had guarded against that necessity.

He gave a short, dry chuckle as his listening ears caught the fall of the catch, and he knew that he had but to swing open that massive door to lay bare all the funds of Sprague's Bank.

"Nothing like it, lads!" he took time to whisper in his exultation. "It took old Sprague a round month to get his bank fairly started, but here we have opened one in less than half an hour! Hurrah for us! In a whisper, of course, but—hurrah for us!"

That caution came in good time, for the lesser rascals were greatly excited by the glorious prospect spread before them as their leader swung that heavy barrier open, and they might easily have forgotten prudence in that wild intoxication of spirits.

Although only a private bank, this was the only institution of the sort within a wide range, and consequently did a heavy business. The safe was liberally stocked with bank-notes, as well as bags of gold and silver coin.

These last, of considerable bulk, and of still more considerable weight, the chief turned over to two of his present party, bidding them prepare them for transportation without delay.

While they were thus occupied, stowing the sacks away in stout bags, more suitable for carrying on horseback, the chief secured the various packages of bills. The most of these he secured on his own person, though others were intrusted to the third private.

Although working with such rapidity, nothing was overlooked, and no cash was left behind. Many of the papers and notes at which the leader gave a comprehensive glance, were of good value, and under different circumstances would hardly have been left behind.

"What a pity a man can't be a genuine hog for once in his life!" he muttered, as he discarded sundry papers with a half sigh. "All of those might be turned into hard cash, but—no go now!"

"I kin tote 'em all, boss, ef ye want!" greedily muttered one of the party, catching that regretful plaint.

"But you'll not!" sharply came the retort. "Take just what I give you, and nothing else. If aught else should stick to your fingers, I'll ask you the reason why, when the time comes for dividing up. You save?"

"Well, it's jest as you say, boss, only I thought—"

"I'm doing the thinking for all hands, Pierson. Pull out with your load, and ride direct to the den. You'll find others there, or they'll find you there. Give and take the signs before you mix, and then say as little as may be, until I come to explain to all hands. Now—pull out!"

He had his men under good subjection, and without stopping to ask questions or to make suggestions, the two muscular rascals lowered their heavily-laden sacks through the opening in the floor, and following after, were instantly lost to view of the pair remaining in the bank.

The chief completed his inspection of the place, making sure nothing in the way of cash had been overlooked, then closed the safe and swung to the door of the vault.

"Old Sprague himself might come in here and never suspect for a moment how thoroughly we've cleaned him out!" chuckled the chief, with grim glee in face and in voice as he cast a glance around them.

"But—thar's the hole in the floor, an' the hole through to the other shebang, boss," ventured his comrade. "When he comes to open the safe and finds the shekels all gone, won't he—won't they all know jest who to fix the job onto?"

"Do you know anything particular about giant powder, or dynamite, Watson?" asked his chief, quietly.

"I've worked ten year with 'em, boss."

"I made no mistake in picking you out for an old hand, then. Come with me to the other end of the tunnel, please."

Leading the way, the chief recovered a package which he had brought into the house with him, and tearing off the cover, he exposed half a dozen cartridges, all ready for use.

"You know how the stuff does its work, Watson, so I needn't tell you just where to place it, nor just how. Fix four of the cartridges in the bank, where they'll do the most good, and leave two of them here."

"Those you place in the bank, you must cut to burn just two minutes. These two you'll set at one minute. When all is placed ready, station yourself near the window inside the bank, at the left of the door as you enter from the front. When you hear me give three little taps on that window, touch off your four cartridges in there, hurry back to this place, set off these two, then skin outside, and make your way to the den, in case you see nothing of me. It's just possible that I may want you to lend me a hand about another little job."

Watson quickly ran over the main points of the instructions given him, and the chief nodded assent; he had made no mistake, and all that remained was to carry out those instructions.

Satisfied on that important point, he bade the man fall to work, placing his cartridges where the ends of the tunnel would be most thoroughly destroyed, then he left the building, and with broad-brimmed hat slouched over his face, he moved along in the direction of the Express Office.

There were few persons astir on the streets. It was too late for home-bodies, too early for the regular sports to be afoot. And such few persons as he did meet, little suspected what a tremendous "shaking up" this Mexican *vaquero* was preparing for all Eureka City!

No person was near when the chief came to the Express Office, and pausing by the door, he gave the peculiar signal which was caught by the keen ears of the Gold Coin Venus. He gave a soft chuckle of triumph as he received her signal that all was well at her end of the line, and giving no further thought that way, he turned to retrace his steps, after a glance at his watch by the red glow of his cigar tip.

Reaching the bank front once more, he took another look at his watch, then tapped thrice on the window, as agreed upon with Watson. A tap, tap, tap came back to assure him that his signal was understood, and then the chief strode briskly away to a safe distance from the building, pausing once more where the shade lay deep across the street, at that point devoid of all human life save for himself.

"It don't matter so mighty much about the other squad," he muttered, to himself, as he stole yet another glance at the dial of his time-piece. "Still, if they've fell to work as I marked it out for them, they'd ought to be ready and waiting for the signal. So—here she goes, and the big eruption is all ready!"

He drew a rocket from where it was secured to his belt, the stick broken short off so as not to attract attention, and tearing open the end of the fuse, he touched it to his glowing cigar.

The red sparks shot backward with a startling hiss, but his hand was gloved and took no hurt. Then—away soared the rocket!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A LIVELY DEAL IN SILVER.

"I SAY, Johnny, old rocks, what's in the wind, anyway?"

"Work, I reckon, Breezy."

"But—what sort of work?"

"You tell, for I can't!"

Bob Breeze gave a sniff of disgust, but kept fair pace with his present companions as they rapidly left Eureka City behind them.

Only a few minutes earlier, Johnny Dogood, in company with a man whom he introduced as Art. Kinsey, had joined the man from Chicago, and after giving the secret grips and signals, the stranger to Breeze bade him follow, simply stating that there was business brewing which required the assistance of the new recruit.

Although taken fairly aback, Bob Breeze showed no signs of reluctance, and only when he found himself fairly clear of town, passing up the further side of the river, did he ask any pointed questions.

As seen, he received precious little satisfaction from Johnny Dogood, who either lied with bald-faced candor, or else was none the wiser than his old-time pard.

Breeze hardly liked to seem too inquisitive, but he was anxious to find out something of what might lie before him, and ere many more rods were covered, he bluntly addressed Kinsey, with:

"What're we going to tackle, for a starter, pard?"

"We'll know when we get there, I reckon."

"And where is 'there,' if I may ask?"

The fellow turned sharply upon his questioner, speaking grimly:

"Look here, Breeze, didn't I give you the signs all right?"

"Right as right, old fellow, but—"

"Well, I'll say just this much more: The boss sent me to pick up you and Johnny, there. I've done so much! He told me where to lead you fellows, and I'm doing *that*. Now—fall out, and turn back, if you feel that way, and I reckon you can satisfy the boss when he comes to ask why so. If not, come along, and wait for more knowledge until the time comes for you to gain wisdom. That's all, pardner!"

"And I'm buttoned up so tight I couldn't ask another question if my mortal life depended on it!" declared Breeze, abandoning the point as worse than useless.

The three men strode along in silence, and thanks to his recent arrival at Eureka City, Bob Breeze had no means of even guessing at their destination, much less at the sort of work which awaited them when said destination should be reached.

Still, he did not believe that it could be anything very serious, despite the secrecy maintained by their guide. He knew that the chief of that evil gang meditated a big *coup* of some sort, but he fancied it was to come off in the town itself, not out here in the hills, and that belief left him in a much easier state of mind than he would otherwise have been, going it so blindly.

"Barker Brothers' Mills, by glory!" at length muttered Johnny Dogood, as they came in sight of the extensive works, nestling between the rocky hills. "Bullion, I do reckon!"

Bob Breeze made no remark, asked no questions. He was fully committed to whatever lay ahead, and as he could not well hinder the work, he resolved to play his part to the end, hoping by thus sharing in it he might be able to rectify the damage later.

Kinsey passed directly to the strongroom in which the silver bullion was stored, and which everybody in or around Eureka City knew was nightly guarded by armed men who were locked inside the room with the treasure.

At his sharp rap, however, the heavy, iron-studded door swung open, and in place of a shot, there came the words:

"On time, pardner! Fall to work, for we've got a hefty job afore us, an' no mistake about *that*!"

"The heavier the work, the bigger the wages, in a job of this sort. Then, all's working smoothly at this end?"

"Smooth as buttered mush! The grave's all dug, an' only lacks our fillin' it up!"

"Good enough! Johnny, and you, Breezy—this way!"

"On deck, and only waiting for orders, your honor!" breezily answered the detective, catching a clew to the work on hand from that basty interchange of words.

"Spit on your hands, and see how fast you can carry off those bars, then," curtly answered Kinsey himself setting the example.

As there seemed to be a necessity for haste, the two friends fell to work with a will, bearing the weighty bars of silver bullion from the strong-room to a snug nook near one of the rocky heights, where a goodly-sized trench had been opened, and two men were in readiness to complete their task by stowing away the bars as fast as brought to their hands.

At first, having little practical knowledge as to silver in its secondary stage, Bob Breeze wondered why the robbers did not carry the bullion directly away to their den, but as he felt the weight of the bars, and took note of their number, he began to appreciate better the boldness of the trick he was helping to turn that night.

The owners would hardly think of searching for their missing property so near their rifled strong-room; hardly an eighth of a mile from that iron-bound door! And, if the work was thoroughly done, there the rude ingots might lie

in perfect security until a more favorable time came for their removal.

"How much do you reckon they're worth, Johnny?" Breeze took time to mutter in the ear of his friend. "Mighty tough on a fellow's back!"

Johnny Dogood gave a growl that was fully one-half disgust. This was hardly the sort of work he would have chosen of his own free will. He had no objections to stealing, but he liked to know just when and where his pocket was to receive its share of the plunder!

There was scant time for talking. Kinsey kept them all at work on the tight jump, like one who feels he is running a race against time. In his anxiety he pressed the two ditch-diggers into more active service, only slackening his efforts when the last load of bullion was on the right side of the threshold.

"Hustle it to the hole, boys," he ordered, drawing a long breath and brushing a hand across his sweat-bedewed brows as he cast a glance toward Eureka City. "Cover it up, and leave no ugly signs behind ye, for the Barkers'll tear the country wide open when they find out what's been hatching while they slept!"

Instead of going with them, Kinsey turned and re-entered the works, where he had business of his own to attend to.

When the last bars of silver were placed in the ditch, all hands fell to work covering them up, taking dirt from the capacious tarpaulin on which it had been piled, filling the opening up level, then sprinkling all over with gravel, stones and dry dust, which had been saved for a "top-dressing."

When this was done, the tarpaulin was gathered up by the corners, and carried with its heavy burden across to the little stream which supplied the works with water. Once there, the rest was easy.

The contents were cast into the water, and swallowed up without leaving any signs to draw suspicion toward the truth; those robbed would have to solve the enigma as best they could, without a clue left behind by the robbers.

Not until the last of the debris was cast into the water, and the tarpaulin itself rolled up ready for transportation back to the works from which it had been taken, did the men stop for a fair, square breath, so thoroughly had Kinsey impressed them with the need of great haste.

"Good enough, and I'm sayin' it, too!" ejaculated one of the faithless guards, without whose hearty co-operation the trick could never have been turned without bloodshed. "Now—when's the big circus goin' to reach town, Art. Kinsey?"

That worthy had just rejoined them, and he cast another glance in the direction of Eureka City before making reply:

"I can't say, exactly, but it'll be along presently. Just keep your eyes open, and maybe you'll see what you'll see."

"Oh, come down! Ain't we all in the job, s-a-y?"

"I reckon you are, but what I don't know, I can't very well tell, can I?" dryly retorted Kinsey, then adding: "Fetch the tarpaulin back to the stamps, mates. I hardly reckon they'd miss it, but we're not here to take any off chances. It's clean business, you want to bear in mind!"

The order was obeyed without further question, and then all save Arthur Kinsey squatted in a little circle not far from the gloomy buildings, talking in whispers, trying to guess just what else was in the wind for that night.

A good many wild ideas were broached, but Bob Breeze was unusually silent for such a nimble tongue as he had proved himself ever since striking town. Not but that he was doing his full share of wondering and surmising.

It is true that, when joining the gang of robbers, he had expected to play his part in whatever might turn up, but this was something a trifle beyond his wildest calculations. Then—he sprang to his feet with a sharp ejaculation, as a rocket shot high into the heavens, bursting into a shower of brilliant stars, with a clear report.

He sprang toward the works, only to be met by Kinsey, who cried out:

"Back, ye fool! Do ye want to be blown up to the stars?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ERUPTION AT EUREKA.

UNLOCKING his fingers when the rocket tugged strongly against his restraining hand, the chief watched its hissing soar with a subdued laugh, and as the explosion came with its parti-colored stars, he drew the folds of the heavy poncho more closely around his shoulders and up to his face.

"That ought to kick up something of a bobbery in itself!" he muttered, as he moved rapidly away from the spot. "Rockets don't lay around loose in these diggings, and if the fools don't take it for a meteor, or a shooting-star, I reckon—Didn't I tell you so?"

His keen ear caught sundry sounds which told him the unusual spectacle had attracted considerable attention, but this fact gave him precious little trouble.

"They're turning their eyes in the wrong direction, for we're hardly heavenly workers on this occasion!" was his grim comment, as he came to a pause once more, turning toward the

main portion of town with an expectant air. "Time's up, surely! Now—success or a fizzle? Which one speaks first? Not so much matter about the Barker—"

He never completed that sentence, for, just then, the great eruption began!

A terrible explosion, the force of which, though so many rods away, almost cast the outlaw chief from his feet. A roar as of a score great thunderbolts combined into one. A lurid glare that dulled the moon and the stars. And then—all this repeated!

First at the bank, then at the Express Office, came the explosions, and while the air was filled with flying fragments, with echoes and rumblings, with screams and shouts and curses of human beings, the third explosion came from the reduction works belonging to the Barker Bros.

Truly had the chief spoken within bounds when he declared that Eureka City should experience the greatest eruption of its life!

Words are powerless to express a tithe of that horrible din, that stunning uproar, that scene of wild confusion wherein the strongest seemed the weakest, the bravest men the most timid, before this as yet unknown horror!

Of all within the bounds of Eureka City, probably the one to whose scheming brain and ruthless hands were due all this terror and ruin, alone gave utterance to a deliberate laugh as he stood in security from the flying missiles, watching and waiting to profit even more fully by that deed of destruction.

When the chief had halted, just before the first explosion came, he was only a few yards from the front gate which gave admittance to the grounds surrounding the Sprague place, and after his first glance at that flame-reddened sky, the villain turned his gaze upon the house itself, like one wondering whether or no the alarm would spread to its inmates.

The lights which reflected dimly through the curtained windows had already told him the family were still out of their beds. This was not so strange, for the night was still young, much as had been accomplished by the plotters.

The second explosion had hardly taken place, when the front door was violently flung open, and Hawley Sprague rushed forth, coat in one hand and hat in the other, just as he had caught them up while passing through the hall.

He was too late to see the reddest glare, the heaviest shower of fragments cast high toward the stars, but he did take notice of the dust-cloud which hung in rolling masses above the town, and that alone was sufficient to tell him something far out of the ordinary run of events had just taken place.

Paying no attention to the startled cries and the bewildered questions sent after him by Myrtle, who now appeared in the open doorway, Hawley Sprague dashed at reckless speed toward the scene of confusion.

"Go it, limber-legs!" derisively muttered he to whom all that ruin might be attributed. "One more fool to join the idiots! And now—half my plunder for a surety of ten minutes' play!"

Hawley Sprague passed that covert by, without for an instant suspecting the peril lurking there. He had thoughts only for his own property, which might easily be endangered by those terrible explosions in town. Who could say? Might it not be an audacious raid on his bank?

All was excitement and confusion. Even those who had so soon learned just where the "eruption" had wrought its bitterest work, were capable of little else than staring mutely, or cursing wildly at the ruins.

Then, too, bodily harm had been wrought by some of the flying missiles. From here, from there, came shrieks of physical pain, or mental agony, all serving to add to the terrors of that never-to-be-forgotten night.

Frightened, bewildered, not knowing what to think or even what to surmise, Myrtle Umfreville for a few minutes stood in the doorway, looking, listening, marveling, yet without one passing sigh enough to offer a solution of all that terrible commotion.

Gilbert Sprague had not been at home. Hawley Sprague, as seen, had hastily dashed away to investigate. The servants, man and woman, had vanished either before or immediately after the wild alarm. Myrtle was alone at the house, and—evil eyes were upon her!

Hardly conscious of what she was doing, Myrtle left the threshold and moved toward the front gate, listening and watching, her face pale as marble under the stars, so great was her suspense and agitation.

Then the chief acted, rising up from his covert, the heavy poncho flung across his arm in place of across his shoulders, and as he rushed rapidly toward the maiden, now at the front gate, he ejaculated:

"You're needed, Miss Umfreville! Hawley Sprague has been hurt by— Silence, you little idiot!"

He adroitly flung the poncho over her head, gathering its folds in his arms as he changed his tone to hiss that fierce warning against making an outcry: but it was hardly required.

Myrtle had been caught completely off her

guard, and not until her upper body was thoroughly muffled, the poncho held close about her by the strong arms which swung her from her footing, did she realize that evil was intended; and then it was too late!

Without stopping to bind her limbs or to make his capture more conveniently carried, the outlaw hurried across the grounds, heading for the timber-lined bank of the little river not many score rods distant.

Myrtle, though so completely surprised, and taken at such a terrible disadvantage, quickly began to struggle for freedom, and though her cries were materially subdued by the blanket which enveloped her head and shoulders, she made noise enough to irritate that arch-villain.

"Quiet, ye cat!" he growled, at his first pause for breath. "No harm shall touch you, if you're sensible: but, yelp loud enough to fetch trouble on me, and I'll slit your throat as I would that of a yowling cat! Now, live or die, take your own choice!"

Myrtle tried to speak, but even that privilege was denied her. The ruffian lifted her in his arms, and once more hastened toward the covert where he knew waited the means of a more rapid as well as less laborious flight.

Gaining this cover, he paused where the trees cast their deepest shadows, removing the poncho from about his captive's face, half-fearing lest she had been smothered in stern reality, but giving a growl of grim satisfaction as the poor girl gave a shiver and a gasping breath.

She had not quite lost her senses, though she could have endured that smothering process but a few seconds longer.

"All the easier rigged out for travel, and every minute counts big, just now!" muttered the chief to himself, as he drew a knife to slit strips from one edge of his Mexican blanket, then using them to tie his captive's hands and feet, paying not the slightest attention to her growing resistance as her strength came back under the reviving influence of the cool night air blowing down the river.

Knotting a handkerchief over Myrtle's lips, working with marvelous rapidity, considering the utter darkness with which they were enveloped, the kidnapper left her lying on the grass for a few moments, going for and returning with a saddled and bridled horse, which, to all seeming, had been placed in hiding for this very service.

Lifting Myrtle to the saddle, and deftly balancing her there, the chief leaped up behind her. It was an easy matter for him to slip forward into the saddle, supporting the captive across his muscular thighs, then riding boldly for the bridge which spanned the river.

All Eureka City was in such an excited turmoil over the eruption, that he had slight cause for fearing notice or intervention. Still, a ready revolver was gripped in his right hand, and those who stopped him, that night, surely would have stopped lead as well.

No such interruption came, however, and once across that boarded span, the outlaw touched up his doubly laden horse, breaking into a gallop which cast the rods rapid behind them.

Only once did poor Myrtle give him serious trouble, and then, despite her desperate efforts to break away from that loathsome embrace, her attempt to shriek loudly enough to bring assistance, his supremacy was readily maintained.

"Don't try to play the fool again, girl," he sternly warned, while replacing that partially slipped bandage. "I don't wish to harm you, but, don't try me too far, for I'll—"

He broke off abruptly, for a clatter of hoofs came to his ears.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN INTERESTING TABLEAU.

THE outlaw chief drew his revolver again, but it was more as a matter of habit than with the expectation of being forced to use its contents. And the truth of his intuitions was made clear when his signal came floating back in kind, and in a few seconds more, a foaming horse was reined up close to his side.

"Is all well, lieutenant?"

"All is well, captain!"

Only those words came to the ears of the maiden, and her heart sunk low once more as she divined how little she had to hope from this new-comer.

After this meeting, the horses were pressed ahead without mercy, for both of the leading outlaws were anxious to reach the den, where they could fairly sum up results, and take the rest both felt in need of.

It was considerably later, but on that same eventful night.

An oil lamp shed a dim, uncertain light through the rock chamber where Bob Breeze had discovered those pools of blood, human, or intended to be mistaken for such.

Myrtle Umfreville, her limbs unbound, but their mistress none the less a helpless captive, was seated upon a little pile of blankets, her pale, shocked face showing how terribly this reverse had shaken her in mind, even more than in body.

Before her stood the chief of the outlaws, now without mask or other disguise, so far as his face was concerned, though he still wore his Mexican *vaquero* rig.

And that face was the face of Bailey Pemberton, the Gold Coin Sport.

"It is true," he was saying, evidently in continuance of an argument begun long before the thread is picked up here, "for only such perfect love as is mine, could justify such a bold step as I have taken. I love you, Myrtle Umfreville, and I have sworn that you shall love me!"

"Never—never!" murmured the maiden, shrinking back from his glowing gaze.

"Don't you be so sure, little lady," retorted the outlaw, with a short, dry chuckle. "There's many a worse fate than for a girl to honestly wed with a man who fairly worships her; and one of them is to pine away with grief because the man she fancies she loves, is forgetting her very existence in his passion for another woman!"

"I don't—I will not—"

"So your lips say, pretty one, but your brain is telling you better, even this soon! You can't really doubt what I've told you: that Alick McGregor has thrown you over for another woman, whose little finger is far more valuable in his sight than your entire body!"

Myrtle bowed her face upon her hands, her frame shivering with the sobs which she strove so hard to smother. Bailey Pemberton stood watching her, his darkly handsome visage already lit up with a sense of coming victory.

As far as lay in his power to love, he loved this maiden, but his idea of wooing lay in force, not in tenderness. He knew that Myrtle had already suffered and endured much, but he felt never a spark of pity. He had a point to win, and he would never give over until that point was actually scored.

"You called me a liar, a bit ago, sweetness," he added, his voice smooth and mellow, but with the iron grip at its back, for all. "You said that nothing on earth or in heaven could make you believe Alick McGregor false to you, false to his vows, false to his manhood, as you lumped the lot. Now—what if I can *prove* all this to you? Will you listen to me with more patience, *then*, little angel?"

"You said—"

"I said this, among other things, pretty," supplied Pemberton, as her voice choked and she could not complete her sentence. "I said that you must marry me—a legal marriage, please take note! I said that you must marry me, or I'd take care all the world stood firm in the belief that you had shared the flight of the defaulting Express agent!"

"You lie!" flashed the maiden, once more strong enough to defend the man she loved so truly. "Mr. McGregor never wronged living man!"

"So you say, dear child, but what are the plain facts? And, please bear in mind that I am only stating what is susceptible of proof, even, in the eyes of one who, like you, holds perfect faith in Alick McGregor and his honesty. Now—listen.

"Alick McGregor never really cared a pin for you. He pretended to be over head and ears in love with you, simply in order to have a better chance to get at the truth concerning Sprague's bank. And all the time he was *playing* lover to you, he was *acting* lover to Lady Venus!"

Myrtle tried to utter a denial, but her voice failed her. A lump seemed growing in her throat, and she could not speak a word.

"Why do I torture you, darling?" his voice growing softer, as though he sincerely compassionated her sufferings. "Because I believe in the good old adage, kill or cure! Because I wish to fairly open your eyes to the bitter truth. Then how gladly will I soothe your pride! How tenderly will I bind up your hurts! How—"

"You are a demon! Leave me! I can't bear anything more!" passionately sobbed the poor girl, almost beside herself.

"When I have fully accomplished the duty set aside for me to perform, Myrtle, *then* I will leave you to your own thoughts, if you still insist. But *now*—you must hear me to the end.

"I said that Alick McGregor has been *playing* you false from start to finish, and I am fully prepared to make good my assertion. As a starter, let me give you a glimpse of what has been brewing for so long.

"You have doubtless heard tell of the band of road-agents who have been operating in this section? Well, the real chief of that band was and still is—Alick McGregor!"

"No, no! I will not believe you!"

"Not right now, perhaps, but you can't help it in the end," came the quiet response. "For many weeks past, McGregor has been planning for a glorious eruption at Eureka, and this very night his plans came to a head.

"You heard those heavy explosions, of course? One of them blew up your guardian's bank—after every dollar in cash had been carried away by Alick McGregor and his men!

"Another destroyed the Express Office, but—Alick McGregor had rifled the safe before the fuse was fired!"

"A third destroyed the reduction works of Barker Brothers, but there, too, Alick McGregor's tools had completed their work of robbery, and the once owners may search the ruins, foot by foot, without stumbling over a single bar of all their silver bullion."

"False—all false!" murmured Myrtle, chokingly.

"True, every word I utter, Miss Umfreville," declared the Gold Coin Sport, never for an instant faltering in the line he had marked out for himself. "Can you think me such a purblind idiot as to deliberately lay myself open to your contempt for a liar, as well as your hatred?"

"And so I repeat: from start to finish Alick McGregor has been using you as a tool, while all the time his heart and love has been lavished upon the woman *faro-dealer*, Lady Venus.

"How do I know all this? I'm coming to that point, right away. Because I was one of the first allies McGregor tried to win over to his bold schemes. And I joined him! Why not? There was big money to be gained, with comparatively slight risk. And then—my chief reason, dear little girl! And then, McGregor swore that for my private share, *I should have you!*"

With a low moan of affright, Myrtle shrank further away from that ardent tone, those passionate eyes. But Bailey Pemberton had not yet reached the stage for showing actual violence, and he thrust both hands behind his back, the better to resist temptation, and spoke again:

"You still doubt, Myrtle? Well, would you be willing to trust in the evidence of your own eyesight? If you could see Alick McGregor fondling Lady Venus, your successful rival? If you could see them embrace, hear them talk of love's delights, see them join lips to lips?"

"Don't—you lie, sir!" springing to her feet with sudden fire. "Alick McGregor is true as you are false. He is—"

"He is even now laughing with his lady-love over his poor dupe's misery!" sternly cried the outlaw chief, grasping an arm as he asked: "Dare you put him to the test, Miss Umfreville? Dare you go to where Alick McGregor is, this very minute? If so, say the word, and I'll take you to him without further delay."

"Yes—take me to him—to Alick!" huskily panted the half-crazed maiden, staggering so that she must have fallen on that rough floor, only for Pemberton's quick supporting grasp.

"Come, then, and I'll guide you to Alick McGregor," he said, with outward coldness, but with a devilish fire glittering in his dark eyes.

Hardly conscious of what she was doing, Myrtle yielded to his touch, and the outlaw hurried her through the dark passage leading to the second of the inner chambers, lying back of the larger one where Bob Breeze had undergone his inquisition, several days before.

Without a word Pemberton paused, to point to the tableau which lay before them, under the dim light of an oil lamp; to Alick McGregor, reclining with his head in the lap of Lady Venus. Her fingers were toying with his curly hair, her lips bent to press his, and—with a wild, heart-rending shriek of agony, Myrtle swooned outright.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BEGINNING A NEW DEAL.

THIS was rather more than Bailey Pemberton had calculated upon, and as he caught that falling form in his arms, he uttered a sharp cry for help, which brought Lady Venus to the spot in short meter.

"Lend a hand, can't you?" he growled, thoroughly cast off his balance for the time being.

"So much for trying to play your game! The poor girl is dying, already!"

Lady Venus broke into a mocking laugh which might have been dangerous to herself, only that the Gold Coin Sport's hands were both occupied just at that moment.

"Dying?" she echoed, seemingly convulsed with mirth. "Not near so bad off as *you* are, old fellow! And you're only scared to death!"

She placed the lamp which she had caught up at that alarm, in a secure spot, then fell to work after a systematic fashion.

"The little silly has only fainted," she explained, then added in more hurried tones: "Haden't you better go turn back any of the lads whose curiosity may have been awakened by her squeal, cully?"

"Then you think—she's not dangerous?"

"Only to your heart and brain, old fellow," half-mocked the Gold Coin Venus. "I'll fetch her 'round before you can get back. Do you want the entire family taking notes, I say?"

His worst fears set at rest by those reassuring words, the chief left his especial prize in the care of Lady Venus, and strode away to guard against any unwelcome interference in matters which did not immediately concern the rank and file.

He almost immediately caught sight of one of the gray-hoods who had been attracted to the spot by those cries, but as his stern challenge rung forth, the fellow vanished like some bodiless phantom.

Pemberton whipped forth a revolver, but before he could fire, the man had disappeared, leaving no certain clew behind him. And the

chief was not so sorry, after all, now that he had time for a second thought.

It could only be a touch of natural curiosity, such as even the most reliable of his henchmen might fall victim to.

"I'd be a fool to rub it in too deep, just now!" he reflected, while making his way through the gloom to the outer chamber, where he found his men gathered, faces turned that way at his approach, but all masked after the usual fashion.

"Which one of you fellows was it I caught a glimpse of, back here?" he demanded, but without any particular anger in his tones.

One of the gray-hoods stepped apart from his mates, meekly bowing his head, with empty hands crossed over his breast, but without saying aught.

"Well, just one word to you, and the rest of the family can take out their share," curtly added the leader. "What takes place in yonder, matters nothing to any of you. *That* is a private speculation on the part of your leaders, through which none of you will lose a red cent. So—write it down in your minds, and write it deep; no matter what sounds you may hear coming from that direction, pay no attention to them, unless it should be a regular call from your officers."

Pemberton paused for a brief space, glancing from figure to figure, as though deliberately offering any or all a fair chance to raise objections or to ask questions; but none such came. Evidently they knew the temper of their captain far too well to run any wild chances.

"If you are wanted, you'll be called in tones which you can't mistake," Pemberton emphasized. "Until that call comes, rest your souls in patience, my fine lads!"

Turning, the captain retraced his steps, to be met by Lady Venus at the junction where the path divided to reach each of the smaller chambers.

"Well, how's she getting along?" he hastily demanded, without giving his confederate time to speak first.

"All right, of course. 'Twas nothing but a little fainting spell, and only a man would have been silly enough to kick up such a bobbery over it. I wish *my* task promised to be one-half as easy as *yours*!"

Lady Venus gave a half-sigh with those words, but Pemberton did not retort in kind. There was a touch of anxiety in his tones as he growled, rather harshly:

"You've got to manage him, though, girl. *Got to manage him*, or—you know what else!"

"Death, you mean?" slowly asked Lady Venus, her face showing unusually pale by the rays of the lamp she still carried.

"What else? In trying to win him over, you'll have to expose not only your own hand, but the part we've all played in this big game. Do you reckon, even for a moment, that we could afford to turn McGregor loose with all that knowledge?"

"Of course not, and so I tell you again: crowd *your* game! By playing one against the other, we'll break them both down, and so get our best wishes. You've made a beginning. Crowd her, without a let-up! I can't keep Alick under the influence of drugs *all* the time. So—strike while the iron's hot, and don't give her a chance to do too much cool thinking!"

"All right! I'll do it!" declared Pemberton, that advice happening to chime well with his own inclinations. "You put her—where?"

"In the room, yonder. You'll find her smart enough to listen, I reckon, though she may be a little hysterical at first. Now—I'm going back to my own particular honey!"

With a low, half-mocking laugh, Lady Venus parted from the Gold Coin Sport, each going their way, neither of them once suspecting that nearly every word which had passed between them, had been caught and mentally recorded by the identical gray-hood who had avowed himself the intruder of a few minutes earlier.

But such was the case, and if the confederates could have seen what face lay hidden within that mask, some of their nearly forgotten suspicions might well have returned to life and vigor.

"See you later, Venus!" mentally affirmed Bob Breeze, casting a look after the woman as she went one way, then stealing noiselessly along in the rear of Bailey Pemberton as he took the other passage. "Just now, this gentleman is *my* meat!"

He used all caution, but this was hardly necessary. The passage was too dark for eyesight to be of much avail. Then, too, after the stern warning he had given his men, the captain never took thought of any one among them playing spy over his movements.

Without pausing or glancing back, the chief hastened to the rock chamber where he had imprisoned Myrtle Umfreville from the first. He found her, half reclining upon the rude pallet of blankets, the picture of grief and despair.

He paused, gazing upon her without knowing just how to renew his cruel assault upon her faith in her lover. That doubt, not a touch of humane pity, held him in brief check, and before he could fully decide upon the proper method of resuming his attack, Bob Breeze took action.

The Rounder Detective had not been idle since reaching the den, in company with Johnny Do

good and the rest of those who had helped him loot the treasure chamber at the Barker Brothers' Works. He knew that only the two chief plotters were in this quarter with their captives, and so he felt that he could act with greater boldness than would be justifiable were he running the risk of being interrupted by others of that evil band.

With a heavy stone wrapped tightly in a piece of blanket, Bob Breeze stole up behind the chief on tiptoes, then struck heavily with his padded weapon, dropping it on the instant, and putting on the garrote as the surest method of silencing any alarm.

Bailey Pemberton gave a choked, gurgling gasp, and his arms worked spasmodically, but that heavy stroke had done its work to perfection, and he fell an easy victim to the detective.

Myrtle gave a faint cry as she saw those two figures locked in what must have seemed to her like a death-grapple, but she was too weak and unnerved to feel actual alarm, and reading something like this in her pallid face, Bob Breeze checked the words which he was about to fling her way, as a precaution.

Only pausing long enough to strip the captain of his weapons, the detective lifted him in his arms, and crossing the chamber, entered a narrow passage which he had explored once before.

He had no light to guide his steps, but Robert possessed a rare sense of locality, and he found little difficulty in conveying his valuable prize to the contracted quarters which he had inspected on the night of his initiation into the band of road-agents.

Lowering his burden, and opening the slide of a pocket-lantern, now that he felt perfectly secure from intrusion, Bob Breeze "took stock."

"Lucky I didn't miss my guess far in calculating that you had a pretty tough nut on your shoulders, Murray Nash!" the detective soliloquized, while examining the head of his captive. "No bones broken, and you'll be able to talk—when I see fit to give you the chance!"

Apparently that was not intended to be very soon, for, after binding the Gold Coin Sport hand and feet with strong cords which he had provided for that express purpose, Robert applied a gag as well.

He found some little difficulty in doing this, for the chief was regaining both consciousness and strength, and struggled as far as the circumstances would permit; but Bob Breeze made a success of it, as he was rather in the habit of doing by the way!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PLAYING ANOTHER TRUMP.

It was a strong temptation which Robert felt, just then, as Bailey Pemberton glowered viciously up at him, and one hand actually rose to the hood which concealed his identity; only to fall again, without lifting the mask. Time enough to triumph over his enemy when victory was more fully assured than it was just at present.

Taking a final look at the bonds he had so carefully applied, and finding nothing there to occasion him any uneasiness of mind, the Rounder Detective turned the slide of his lantern, and picked his way back through the dark.

"Next thing is to tackle Lady Venus!" passed through his mind while thus engaged. "If I can put the comethor on her, as smoothly as I downed his royal nibs, won't I be in big luck, though!"

Rather oddly, Robert felt that this adversary would prove herself to be far more difficult to handle than had the chief himself, but he knew that the task must be undertaken, and performed, if he really hoped to fully succeed in the daring plans which he had formed on the spur of the moment, as it were.

As already shown, he had been kept in the dark as to what was the actual programme until the very last minute. Even after the silver bullion was stowed away, and those mighty explosions took place, he had only a vague idea as to what the chief and his lieutenant were trying to carry out.

It was not until some little time after his squad had reached the cavern in the hills, that Bob Breeze knew of the captives having been brought there. But when, through risky spying, he had learned something of the peril which really menaced Myrtle Umfreville, he resolved to save her, even though he risked losing the game for which he had sought so long and so far.

The odds were very heavy against him, and discovery meant certain death to himself, but the detective never faltered for that. He would win, or he would lose his life making the bold attempt.

Not a little encouraged by his first successful coup, Bob Breeze prepared to play another trump card, trusting to audacity to carry him safely through.

He reached the little chamber in which the maiden was confined for the present, finding all as he had left it. Myrtle was lying on the pallet, her face hidden in her hands, sobbing softly, as though worn out by her trials.

Robert hesitated for a brief space, strongly tempted to breathe a comforting word in her

ear, but he wisely refrained. With her nerves so completely unstrung, Myrtle could hardly have borne good tidings without becoming hysterical in her joy, and that might easily prove dangerous, not only to herself, but to the man who was risking his life in the attempt to save her from worse than death.

Picking up the heavy poncho which had played a prominent part in the capture of Miss Umfreville, Bob Breeze looked to his pistols, then turned from that chamber to enter the passage which would lead him to the other enlargement, in which Lady Venus had prepared such a highly interesting tableau for the especial benefit of Myrtle Umfreville.

Pausing at the union of paths, to make sure none of the gang were coming that way, Bob Breeze crept noiselessly along until he could catch a glimpse of the chamber and its present occupants.

Alick McGregor was alone with Lady Venus, and their positions were pretty much the same as when poor Myrtle was given a glimpse, by her captor, of their apparent felicity.

Now, as then, the Express-agent was under the influence of a drug, but the effects of this was rapidly wearing off, and even now he was showing signs of repugnance to that siren.

Contenting himself with that one look, Bob Breeze retreated as silently as he had advanced, until at a proper distance. Then he gave a low signal as of warning, after which he strode briskly forward, his footfalls plainly evidencing his approach.

He found Lady Venus on her feet, standing in front of the man who lay on a doubled blanket, her face veiled, her voice sounding sternly impatient as she demanded:

"Who are you, and what do you want? Didn't the captain leave strict orders that no person was to come this way?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but the boss says of you'll jest come to him, a bit," hurriedly mumbled the disguised detective, that muffling hood rendering his tones anything but distinct, and precluding recognition through the ear, no matter how keen and accurate that sense might be.

"What does he want? Why didn't he come himself?"

"Thar's trouble, I'm afeard, ma'am," still more hurriedly. "They's word o' some sort come from town, which—he said hurry ma'am!"

The start given by Lady Venus told Bob Breeze he had said quite sufficient, and he was too wise to risk more than was strictly necessary. He drew back, as the woman advanced, and led the way at a quick pace into the dark passage.

Lady Venus paused for an uneasy glance at her especial captive. He was showing unmistakable signs of rallying from the drug, and she did not like to leave him under such circumstances. But—

"I'll have to chance it, for he'd never have sent a messenger unless the danger was too great for his own coming!" she muttered, following rapidly in the wake of the gray-hood.

Nothing could have suited Bob Breeze better, for he had ample time in which to pick up the heavy poncho which he had left near the union of paths, and spread it out for deft use.

The gloom was all in his favor, for he could just distinguish Lady Venus by the lighter background, while he himself was invisible. And then—he made his second leap for victory!

True to his purpose, the heavy blanket was flung over the woman's head and shoulders, and as his left arm closed in the garroter's crook around her neck, his right encircled her waist, even as his foot deftly knocked her feet from under her, as he gave a lift and a tug.

Lady Venus struck the floor with a heavier shock than Robert intended should be hers, but he was playing for too heavy stakes to be at all finical in his treatment of his enemies, and without stopping to ask pardon, he dropped his own weight upon the Gold Coin Venus, giving her no chance to shout forth an alarm, and precious little for struggling while he made his capture sure.

His first act was to deprive Lady Venus of her pistols, knowing as he did that a single shot just then would ruin all hopes, by fetching the entire gang upon him.

His second, was to twist the poncho tightly around her face and throat, and then, holding it in place with one hand and arm, he slipped the other one under her body, lifting her in his arms, and hurrying at his best speed past the junction, turning toward the chamber in which he had captured Bailey Pemberton only a few minutes earlier.

He had a little dread lest Myrtle give the alarm in her fright at this intrusion, but the poor girl hardly made a motion at their coming. Broken-hearted at the tableau she had witnessed, and broken in nerve by the manner of her abduction, she lay with face hidden upon her hands, never glancing up as Bob Breeze passed rapidly across the cavern.

He drew a long breath of relief as he reached that dark passage which led to the den which he had chosen for the temporary prison of his captives, and then, fairly out of Myrtle's sight, he paused for breath and a brief rest. Lady Venus was no trifling burden even for one so muscular

as the Chicago detective, and then, too, he was cramped in a degree by the necessity of guarding against any outcry on her part.

Despite her struggles, Robert kept her silent until he had caught his second wind, then he lifted her in his arms once more, pressing on through the utter darkness until he reached the rock-strewn den where he had left the Gold Coin Sport.

Even then he took no chances, but held Lady Venus securely muffled with one arm, while he produced his lantern and unmasked its light. He placed this where its beams would do the most good, then set about completing his work, so far as the woman was concerned.

It was no time for delicacy, and so, seated astride the woman, his knees holding her arms helpless, Bob Breeze removed the poncho, then applied a secure gag as the first move. This done, the rest was comparatively easy, since her harsh treatment had greatly exhausted Lady Venus, and her struggles were easily foiled.

Robert bound her, hand and foot, using strips cut from the poncho which had already come into such good play. He paid no attention to her venomous looks, but "stuck to his knitting" until all was made secure, and the woman was placed alongside her fellow-schemer, although a heavy mass of rock divided them.

"Pretty tough lines, you're thinking, I reckon, mates!" the detective said, with a dry chuckle, as he squatted on a rock where both of his captives could obtain a fair view of his person without straining their eyes too badly. "But you'd ought to have taken everything into consideration before entering this delightful little game of yours!"

"Now, one word of caution to you both. I mean business, pure and simple. I've got you, I mean to hold you, or—turn you over to death! To make no bones about it, I'll simply swear by all that's good! I'll kill you both, before I'll permit your escape or your rescue!"

"Your eyes are asking who in blazes I am? Well, look for yourself!" as he removed his hood. "I'm Bob Breeze, the Rounder Detective, all the way from Chicago, expressly to nip Murray Nash!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GOING FOR ALL IN SIGHT.

If eyes could have delivered death, there would have been three subjects ready for the sexton's art, by the time the unmasked detective finished that brief but clear explanation.

Both of the prisoners glared furiously at Bob Breeze, and then, as the bitter truth could no longer be doubted, they flashed fiercely reproaching looks toward each other.

Robert the Breezy actually seemed to enjoy this portion of his little game, and smiled broadly as he basked beneath the fire of their eyes. The gray hood was pushed back far enough to leave his face open to their gaze, and if his hands kept close to his pistols, that was because he knew the cavern contained the better part of a score tough rascals, never a one of whom but would claim his life as penalty for handling the chief and his lieutenant so unceremoniously, should the truth escape in any manner.

"I'm sorry I couldn't find out just the manner of game you two were playing before this," added the detective, indulging himself a bit longer, after his severe repression for so long. "I would have saved Eureka some bother, I reckon, but, after all, the matter might have been worse. I know where the silver bullion was stowed away. I know where to put my hand on the bank boodle, and the plunder from the Express Company. I know— Well, maybe I'd better leave you just a little food for thought, so you can guess the remainder."

It was delicious fun, mocking these criminals, once so powerful, now so helpless.

"A big sunflower don't begin to express it, dear friends," he said, with a chuckle of grim triumph as he fell to work searching each one of his prisoners in turn. "I'm so chuck full and running over with tickle, that I'll split clean up the back if I don't find a vent for the superfluous in some manner!"

In like manner Bob Breeze kept talking while his trained fingers were at work, and at the end of a very few minutes his double examination was completed. In addition to really valuable articles thus found, the detective made a discovery which fairly well explained the condition in which he had noticed Alick McGregor, and with a half-frown, half-grin, he stowed away the bottle nearly filled with the drug.

He only paused thereafter to take another look at the bonds which he had applied, then masking his lantern and pulling the gray hood over his face, Robert Breeze left that odd prison-cell, making his way back to where Myrtle Umfreville was lying in her misery.

As before, the detective did not venture to address her.

Myrtle paid him no attention as he passed through her apartment, and Bob Breeze met with no interruption while making his way to the chamber from which he had so adroitly lured Lady Venus, and where he expected to meet Alick McGregor.

He was not mistaken in this belief. The Ex-

press agent was there, but sitting up, hands almost fiercely gripping his temples, plainly endeavoring to pierce the mists which that drug had cast over his brain for the time being.

"Careful, pardner, unless you want to kick the frying-pan clean into the fire!" warningly said the detective, in guarded tones, as the agent gave a start and a little cry at his appearance. "If not for your own sake, then for the sake of the lady you love—*be cautious, man!*"

"Myrtle—where—I can't think what—"

Bob Breeze sprang to his side, one hand gripping an arm, the other in readiness to clap over his mouth in case he should grow incautious when the astonishing truth should be made known to him. And then, in hasty whispers, the detective told him sufficient for the present moment: that Myrtle Umfreville was likewise a captive, and that her safety in a great measure depended upon his wise actions.

"Trust me, and choke down your temper, McGregor, and we'll come out on the top o' the heap," he hastily added, as he made Alick buckle about his middle the belt of weapons which he had taken from the Gold Coin Sport. "But don't forget that it's still ten to one against us, with a helpless girl to care for between us. Now—can you walk, reckon?"

"You'll take me to her—to Myrtle?" huskily asked the agent, as he steadied himself upon his feet.

"Direct to her, of course," came the quick response. "Only—if you break down, or if you let her make two much music, old fellow, in the heap of joy of your meeting, I reckon we'll have a bigger graveyard contract spilling all over us, than any two fellows can fill on time."

Bob Breeze was feeling anything but easy in mind as he guided Alick McGregor through the darkness to that second chamber, where his heart-idol was lying in her misery of mind. Yet, what else could he do?

His strong grip restrained Alick just beyond the circle of light shed by that oil lamp, long enough to whisper in his ear:

"I'll stand guard back here, and if the worst is bound to come, I reckon I can hold the fort for a few minutes: long enough, anyway, for you to hustle the young lady back through the hole you'll find beyond where she's lying. Then—you've got tools, and you ought to be man enough to handle 'em, for her!"

"I'll die before—"

"Try living, first, pardner! And that we may have a fair chance to try that end of the poker, do your prettiest to keep the young lady's emotions within reasonable bounds. Now—*get there!*"

Alick sprang forward with true loverly ardor, and almost before Myrtle could divine his presence, she was tightly clasped in his arms, their lips together, for the moment forgetful of all that had happened since their parting, as well as of the perils that still menaced.

"That's all right, and as long as he can maintain the suction, it's mighty little squealing the girl can do!" grimly commented the detective, from his post of observation. "Now—if I was only better posted on such mysteries! Wonder how much o' that it takes to thoroughly calm a hysterical female? Wonder if—well, it looks mighty hard-hearted in a man to spoil such sport, but—the devil's on the box-seat, and everybody knows what his driving means!"

Still, Robert was honest enough to give a cough and a lusty ahem! as he dared risk, under prevailing circumstances, and this friendly warning was not entirely cast away on the lovers. Myrtle clung to her lover, even while shrinking back with paling face, but Alick recognized that figure, and hastily sought to reassure the maiden.

"It's a friend, darling! He saved me—he will save us both, if we only trust him and obey his counsel."

"That's smoother than I can say it, Miss Umfreville," spoke up Robert, with a reassuring bow. "And, what's better, it's true as gospel writ! I will save you both, provided you act according to instructions, without wasting precious time in asking questions or in arguing points which you may fail to catch clearly at the send-off. Now—can I depend on you both, to that extent?"

"You can, sir," instantly replied McGregor.

"That's hearty!" said Breeze, with an approving nod. "As a starter, then, and as a guarantee of good faith on my part, just follow me for a moment or two, please!"

Taking the lamp with which alone the little chamber had been lighted, he led the way through the narrow passage to the den where his two important captives were stowed away. It was quite a shock to both of the lovers, after their recent experience, but Bob Breeze saw that he had acted wisely in taking that step.

"As long as we hold these two persons," he said, in further explanation, "we can stall off the gang in case of premature discovery. One man, with guns in his hands, can hold the pass yonder against an army. But I hardly think 'twill come to that extremity."

"We hold those leaders, and unless you're so careless as to let them get their jaws free, I can't see how they can fetch trouble down upon your heads. Understand?"

"You mean that I am to stand guard over these devils?"

"Yes. I'll put the light back yonder a bit, so that you can see without being seen, in case any person should come this way. When I come, as I hope to do, in good time, I'll whistle the first bar or two of 'The Mocking-bird.' If any one shows up without giving *that* signal, just point out the dead-line to 'em, and if they don't halt, *make it that!*"

"I'll do my level best—for *her* sake! But—you will come back, friend?"

"I'll come back if it's in the wood, you can be sure of that!" Bob replied.

"Then—may I ask what you're going to attempt?" hesitated Alick.

"I'm going for all that's in sight, of course. I'm going to make a clean sweep if I can. If I can't—Well, I'll have some sport out of the mix, at any rate!"

A covert sign bade Alick follow him, and with a whisper to Myrtle, McGregor complied. When beyond hearing of her ears, Breeze muttered:

"It's risky work, of course, but I reckon I can pull it off safely. If not—make the best terms you can, for the lady, through your hold on those two devils. If they won't treat—*kill the man*, if you do nothing else!"

After a few words more, the two men separated, McGregor to return to his lady-love, Bob Breeze to make his way through the dark to the first enlargement, where he found the road-agents gathered, killing time with cards or idle talk.

"Good news, lads!" he cried, in jovial tones, holding aloft a two-gallon keg, giving it a shake which caused its contents to gurgle musically to their eager ears. "The captain sends this, with his best regards! Says he: 'tell my gallant lads to drink our very good health! It is not every night that both captain and lieutenant gets married, so—tell 'em to drink hearty!'"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BREEZY BOB'S BIG ROUND-UP.

THE sun was nearly ready to take his daily dip behind the western hills when a halt was called, and Bob Breeze turned to face the party of well-armed and mounted men who had thus far followed his lead in ardent anticipations of both sport and profit to come.

"One word, gentlemen," he said, as his uplifted hand brought all to a halt. "Before I lead you further, I wish to come to a clear understanding with you all."

"Lead on!" harshly cried Hawley Sprague, who formed one of the company. "You swore that you would show us where—"

"What I said, I will make good, gentlemen, but—to save possible trouble, I want to make my meaning perfectly clear to you all, at the send-off."

"I promised to deliver into your hands the gang that caused such a mighty eruption in Eureka, last night. I'll do this, but I ask as my pay, permission to select one prisoner from the lot, to treat as my very own, to have and to hold, no matter what charges other parties may bring against him. Is this asking *too* much, gentlemen?"

"If we give you this man, you'll turn all the rest over to us?" asked one of the party.

"Yes."

"Who is he? What's his name?" demanded Sprague.

"He is my game. That ought to be enough for a hog. Are you not satisfied?" bluntly asked Robert, intentionally placing the emphasis where he thought it best suited.

"Ob, give way, Sprague!" impatiently cried the senior Barker. "If you get back the best of your boodle, what more do you want, man?"

"If!" echoed the banker, gloomily. "I haven't got it yet, and—"

"You never would, only for me, sir," coldly interrupted the detective. "If the rest of you gentlemen agree to my conditions, *he* don't count. How is it: yes, or no?"

The response was immediate: every man save Hawley Sprague gave an eager yes, and he remained silent.

Without further delay, Bob Breeze bade them alight and secure their animals, saying that for the remainder of the distance they could travel more rapidly afoot than on horseback.

In this, as in all else since leaving Eureka, he was obeyed, and the eager band pressed along close at his heels as he led the way into the trail which would speedily bring them to the road-agents' retreat.

Bob Breeze did not pause to sound the regular signal as he came within sight of the masked entrance, for right well he knew that not one pair of all the lips under that frowning mass of rock, was in fit condition to answer that call.

Parting the vine-clad bushes, he entered the dark hole, pressing rapidly along, sending back a fan of light from his opened bull's-eye lantern to guide his allies.

Not until the entire party were fairly inside the cavern, did the detective turn his lantern so that its clear rays revealed the surprise he had prepared for them: upon a rank of securely-bound men, each face concealed by the gray

hoods which they had ever worn while engaged in their nefarious acts.

"There you are, gentlemen!" he cried, in grim triumph, enjoying, as only a professional man-hunter can enjoy, their ejaculations of wonder and interest at that strange spectacle. "The entire gang, barring two!"

"Two?" echoed one of the party, almost involuntarily.

"Where I said but one, eh?" laughed Robert in reply. "Well, would you have me publicly show up—a lady?"

"What! not—surely not—"

"Lady Venus, no less!"

Then there was a commotion! Never until that instant had one of the party so much as suspected such a startling revelation, and even now they could scarcely believe their own ears.

Possibly Breeze might have made his exception just twice as wide, after that, but he had no such desire.

His sole care now was for the game he had hunted for so long and so far. And touching one of the party on an arm, as a hint to follow, he stole away to the remote den in which he had left the Gold Coin Sport, best known to the citizens of Eureka as Bailey Pemberton, but whom he and an outraged justice best knew as Murray Nash.

"Now, Johnny, pay your price, by standing to my back, or I'll have to retract my pledge, and turn you over to the crowd with the rest of the family!"

"I'll do my level best, sir," huskily mumbled John Dogood. "Only for *you*, I'd pull hemp with the others!"

"And only for you, I'd never have been able to make such an elegant round-up as this, Johnny," grimly laughed the man from Chicago.

Bob Breeze experienced no difficulty in holding fast to his particular prize, for none of the party disputed his right to make such a claim after all he had brought to pass.

He had not only rescued Miss Umfreville, escorting both her and Alick McGregor in safety back to Eureka, but he had drugged the entire company of outlaws, then bound them hand and foot, while they were helpless through obeying the supposed commands of their captain.

And, better yet, he had been the means of recovering even more money than had been stolen from the town just before that tremendous eruption of the past night: for the Gold Coin Sport, never expecting to return permanently to town, had secured his own large winnings made at gambling, and they were found upon his person, and the person of Lady Venus.

The prisoners were carried out of the cavern, and tied upon the horses ridden from town by the armed force. Lady Venus was treated in like fashion, but, as a woman, she was spared the many biting jeers and taunts which her followers were pelted with during that ride.

Johnny Dogood helped Bob Breeze escort his particular prize, and not one of that company, outside of the captives, ever so much as suspected his actual connection with the outlaws. Johnny, aided by Breeze, took precious good care that he should not be seen by any of the captives in his glory, and they, having plenty of food for thought concerning themselves, doubtless believed he formed one of their number, in bonds like themselves.

It may as well be stated here that Johnny helped Robert guard Murray Nash back to Chicago, where the criminal was turned over to the Agency, by "Pinkerton's Pet." And that Dogood, being read a grave lecture by his former associate on the force, duly repented his "falling from grace," and thereafter demeaned himself as an honest member of society, hunting criminals, in place of hunting with them!

Thanks to the information given by Bob Breeze, the stolen bullion was regained by the Barker Brothers, and as the detective refused to accept the generous sum they proffered him for his services, they had all the more left for rebuilding their ruined works.

Hawley Sprague opened another bank, and before the year was out, he yielded to the coaxings of his ward, and consented to her marriage with Alick McGregor. And, as Alick was superseded by another agent at the Express Office, though the loss had hardly come upon the company through fault of his, Sprague took him into the bank, to supply the place left vacant by Gilbert Sprague, who had been killed by a falling stone on that eventful night.

Murray Nash was brought to trial for murder, and paid the full penalty due the law for his atrocious crime.

Lady Venus, in some unexplained manner, effected her escape while the road-agents were being taken to the place, and, so far as the present writer knows, was never again heard from.

Eureka survived its "great eruption," but, as time passed on and the town grew in importance, a change was made in its name, and Eureka, as Eureka, no longer adorns the maps of Idaho.

Bob Breeze is still "Pinkerton's Pet," and while losing none of his natural breeziness, is still a terror to criminals.

THE END.

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